Acclaim for MICHAEL WILDING

If, like most of us, you've begun to sense that life is not quite so simple, then maybe Wilding is exactly who you should be reading. – David English, *Weekend Australian*

The literature of challenge rather than the literature of escape. – Chris de Bono, *Melbourne Herald*

Wilding has steadily produced, for over thirty years, work of high and lasting merit. . . To be a writer like Wilding is to be whole in a sense that should never be lost, not as long as the written word appears between the pages of a literary book. – Don Graham, *Antipodes*

Wilding's writing is rich in humour, fantasy and sharp social observation. – Bruce Bennett, *Contemporary Novelists*

***Academia Nuts*:** – Wilding at his absolute satirical best. – David Williamson. Very clever, in the grand tradition of *Lucky Jim*. – *Guardian*. A witty campus novel? In 2004? It seemed as likely as a holiday romance set amid the tropical delights of Guantanamo Bay. . . But it is very funny. So funny that I had to stop reading it in bed in case my roars of laughter were disturbing the neighbours: so funny that it deserves to be the final great campus novel. It is unlikely to be challenged. For what Wilding's aged unreconstructed dons are playing with such absurd brio is unmistakably the last waltz. – Laurie Taylor, *Times Higher Educational Supplement*

***Aspects of the Dying Process*:** – One of the best writers of short stories in Australia today. – *Australian Book Review.* The short story writer as sociologist, the short story writer as photo-realist. . . .Wilding can accurately pace a story and make a woman ironical and elusive in just a few sentences. – *Times Literary Supplement*

***Scenic Drive*:** – Takes you on a trip that shouldn't be missed … I laughed until I cried. It's rare that I enjoy a book as much as I enjoyed *Scenic Drive* – it's a memorable book, sexy and funny. Once you read it, you'll want to turn all of your friends on to it. – Dianna Pizza, *L. A. Star*. Wilding is fast becoming a well-known figure to the U.S. underground …. It's first-rate fiction. – Dick Higgins, *Newsart*

***This is for You*:** – 21st century writing for 21st-century people. – J. P. Donleavy. Erotic, fiercely intelligent and mordantly funny. – Janette Turner Hospital. His stories subvert and transcend not only sexual and social conventions. . . but story-telling itself. – Jim Crace

***Living Together*:** – Is it really about a ménage a trois? – Princess Margaret. A very funny book and a perfect picture of the people, the time, the place. – David Marr, *Bulletin*. He is so exhilaratingly adept with narrative you cannot put the book down. . . Wilding's pen is sharp as a rapier. – Jan Meek, *Vogue Australia*

***National Treasure*:** – Michael Wilding has form …Witty and genuinely funny. . . But don't be conned. This is fiction with more truth than lies. – Christopher Bantick, *Weekend Australian*. Thoroughly enjoyable, sometimes hilarious. . . But

it is not lightweight: it is tough, well-calculated, smoothly witty. – Brian Matthews, *Australian Book Review*

***Pacific Highway*:** – Readers can recognise that much the narrator recounts issues from his consumption of hallucinogenics. . . But just how much? Where in his account of events does the actual end and his paranoid perception of it begin? And could his suspicions that global conspiracies are behind unwelcome developments in this otherwise near Arcady or Eden be justified? . . . humorous . . . menacing. . . – Brian Kiernan, *Running Wild*

***The Phallic Forest*:** – Elegantly written and evocative. . . an undercurrent of sensitivity and searching for truths. – Jean Bedford, *National Times*

***Raising Spirits, Making Gold and Swapping Wives: the True Adventures of Dr John Dee and Sir Edward* Kelly:** – The story of Queen Elizabeth I's necromancer, John Dee, as transcribed from original documents interspersed with Michael Wilding's own words. A piece of esoterica designed to startle and delight the modern reader. – Peter Porter, *The Economist* Books of the Year

***The Short Story Embassy: a novel*:** – Considerable entertainment. – *Times Literary Supplement*. Excruciatingly funny. – Frank Devine, *National Times*. The best of the talent emerging from down under. – *San Francisco Review of Books*

***Somewhere New: New & Selected Stories*:** – Essential reading. – Robert Yeo, *Straits Times*. What strikes one first, apart from the impressive merits of individual stories, is Wilding's keen sense of literary integrity … Wilding's voice in these stories is always one to attend to: an ironic, witty, highly educated, and in its indirect way, passionate authorial persona who has believed in literature as a life of principle, has seen many of the bases of that belief assaulted by abstruse theory, trendy anti-realism, and sinecure-seeking cynicism, and yet still in the face of everything, is able to make the affirming act through the agency of fiction. . . No one in English writes better fiction about the process of writing than Wilding. – Don Graham

***Superfluous Men*:** – I laughed out loud quite a few times and chuckled often. You're the funniest writer around. – Peter Corris. – Extremely funny. – Irina Dunn

***Wild Amazement*:** – What I think absorbs the reader in the deeply revelatory unmemoir *Wild Amazement* is . . . Michael's clear, almost hyper real remembrance, as if experienced on a guided tour of a radiant, countercultural Disneyland, of a way of life, and a gravely joyous bohemia now gone, of how it was, and what a time it was, it really was, in Sydney in the sixties and seventies, in the Newcastle and the Journos' Club and the Push parties and the plans for a literary life. – Bob Ellis, *Overland*. –Anyone interested in how contemporary Australian writing came to be the way it is, with its strengths and follies, its cliques and patrons, and the challenges it faces, will benefit from reading Wilding's sensitive, sometimes bitchy, often funny and always intelligent tracing of his life's trajectory. – Peter Corris, *Quadrant*

***Wildest Dreams*: –** Deserves to be thought of as a contemporary classic. – Adrian Caesar. An *Australian* Book of the Year

THE PRISONER OF MOUNT WARNING

Also by Michael Wilding

Aspects of the Dying Process
Living Together
The Short Story Embassy
The West Midland Underground
Scenic Drive
The Radical Reader (ed with Stephen Knight)
The Tabloid Story Pocket Book (ed)
The Phallic Forest
Pacific Highway
Reading the Signs
The Paraguayan Experiment
The Man of Slow Feeling
Under Saturn
Great Climate
Her Most Bizarre Sexual Experience
The Oxford Book of Australian Short Stories (ed)
This is for You
Book of the Reading
Somewhere New: New and Selected Stories
Wildest Dreams
Raising Spirits, Making Gold and Swapping Wives: The True Adventures of Dr John Dee and Sir Edward Kelly
Academia Nuts
Best Stories Under the Sun 1 – 3 (ed with David Myers)
Wild Amazement
National Treasure
Superfluous Men
Heart Matters (ed with Peter Corris)

www.michael-wilding.com

Michael Wilding

THE PRISONER OF MOUNT WARNING

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To Stephen Knight

As Lord Peter approached the door of the farm his spirits rose. He enjoyed paying this kind of visit. Although he had taken to detecting as he might, with another conscience or constitution, have taken to Indian hemp – for its exhilarating properties, at a moment when life seemed dust and ashes, – he had not primarily the detective temperament.

Dorothy L. Sayers, *Clouds of Witness*

One

When the phone rang Plant answered it. That was a mistake he wouldn't have made in better times. Former times. But it didn't ring that often these days, and unfounded optimism and baseless curiosity got the better of him. Again.

He wasn't exactly unemployed. Underemployed perhaps. Almost certainly. Certainly in terms of income. Underrewarded. He was freelancing, is how he put it.

So a call from the media was welcome. Work, he thought. Or if not work, money, is what he thought. That was a mistake, too. To imagine that a call from the media could in any way be to his advantage. He was not unfamiliar with the world of newspapers. He had done some journalism. Till he came up with too many wrong answers. Just sit there and write what you're told and forget all you ever heard about investigative reporting. But he hadn't. And here he was.

And the phone rang.

And he leapt to it. Amazed that he still knew how to answer it. Gone were the days when he'd needed the answering machine to field the calls, screen them out, fend them off.

'Yes,' Plant said. Crisp. Eager.

A female person. Ascertaining if he was who he was.

'Yes. That's me.'

These were not the times for 'I am he.'

'Hold the line.'

No 'would you?' No 'please'. No 'sir'. This was heavy personal assistance.

'Mr Huxter would like to speak to you.'

How nice to have someone to place your calls for you. The satisfactions of status. Convenience. Power. Wealth. Bonuses.

The arts editor came on the line.

Lunch. Thursday 12.30.

Not a Friday lunch. Not with the big boys. But Thursday was close.

No 'how about?' No 'would you like?' Just be there.

Plant said he would be there.

Click.

He imagined it was to write one of those dollar a word features. At least a dollar a word. But it wasn't. No point in heaping up the suspense. All through lunch. The dreadful boorishness. The rudeness to waiters. And waitresses. The appalling stories. At the end of it he was no nearer to a dollar a word piece than at the beginning. But that should be no surprise. It had been a mistake ever to have thought differently.

It was like another world. 1956. Nothing had changed. The gloomy waiter in waiters' trousers and shirt. Ageing along with the clientele. The starched tablecloths. The dark timber bar and panelling. The paintings of domed churches beneath the cerulean sky, fishing boats with crosses on their prows on the wine-dark sea, old men with worry beads outside the tavernas. And in the restaurant the suited men at the tables by the window where they had always sat. And women. The

view across Hyde Park, the green light flooding in. And the new million dollar spires of St Mary's cathedral. Worth a few Catholic votes.

There was a table of them. A small table. Someone who looked like an arts editor. Bald. Shaven head. Unshaven bristly lips and jaw. Earring. Baggy unstructured black jacket over baggy black T-shirt. Baggy cotton trousers with bits sewn on all over the place for cartridges or bolt cutters.

'Huxter,' he said, reaching out a clammy hand, not getting up.

The woman in the navy blue power suit and pastel blue shirt was Angela Dark. She gave her welcoming smile. Bold carmine lipstick.

Ghostly Sperrit, the political speechwriter and bagman, looked up from burrowing in his briefcase and grunted.

Shiny blue single-breasted blazer, unpressed gray trousers, grubby white shirt, collar unbuttoned and striped tie at half-mast. The way he had dressed for school and had seen no cause to change. The bad prefect.

'I've been thinking of getting a tattoo,' said Sperrit.

'Where, darling?' asked Angela Dark.

'Saying what? Rupert loves me?' said Huxter. 'Why not engrave it on your brow? Why would anyone want to get a tattoo?'

'He's been reading the lifestyle pages,' said Angela.

'Glad to hear somebody reads them,' said Huxter.

'Have a drink,' said Angela Dark.

Plant accepted.

'Is this a regular lunch?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Angela.

'No,' said Huxter.

Ghostly Sperrit lifted his briefcase onto the table and rummaged through it some more. He emerged with a pocket

transistor radio. He extended its antenna and switched it on. Blasts of static and then the minister addressing the house. Sperrit's minister. Delivering a speech. Sperrit's speech. Plant tried to hear what it was about but the sheer force of cliché bleached out any meaning.

'The Indonesians have invaded,' said Huxter.

'With the full support of China and the USA,' said Angela.

'Quiet,' said Sperrit.

'Quiet,' said the gloomy waiter, no less gloomy, but with an impassioned gloom now.

'It's an important speech,' said Sperrit.

'He should know, he wrote it,' said Angela.

'I am sorry. But the other guests.' The waiter gestured round at the half-empty room. 'They object.'

'Send them to me,' said Sperrit.

'An invitation to frighten off anyone,' said Huxter.

The waiter stood there.

Sperrit reduced the volume.

The waiter remained.

Sperrit offered a further reduction.

The waiter shrugged his arms, like a wrestler preparing a grand throw, and walked back to the bar.

'Can't take you anywhere,' said Angela.

'I'll take you to the movies after this,' said Sperrit.

'Will you now?'

'Preview. Why don't you come? It'll be worth your while.'

He reached across to her knee.

'I've got my own tickets,' she said.

'Well then, no problem,' said Sperrit. 'No conflict of interest.'

This was high society. No doubt about that. The glitterati of yesteryear.

'The thing about radio,' said Angela, 'is there's no way of knowing whether the people speaking have tattoos or not.'

'How do you like the pages?' asked Huxter.

'The pages?' repeated Plant blankly.

Was this the pedophiliac gay power circuit he once read about?

'The arts pages.'

'Oh, the arts pages.' Plant never read them. He found newspapers spoiled his weekend. And not just because he wasn't in them. They left him feeling dissatisfied. Resentful. Empty. The books pages. The colour magazine. The lifestyle section. The whole paper. The relentless trivialisation. The remorseless grasping desperation. All designed to make you envy the rich and famous even while reading the fawning accounts of their seediness. So you would go and buy the useless products advertised to make you feel you lived a rich and famous lifestyle. The unnecessarily expensive watch. The undisposable ballpoint pen. The impossibly expensive to maintain car. The inaccessible time-share apartment. One weekend he stopped reading them and felt a huge relief. Life returned. There was time to do things. Time to do nothing. Free from that anxiety of failure. After that he stopped reading the daily papers on any regular basis. And the richness of the world began to indicate its presence. The everyday. The delightful.

'What do you think?'

Huxter was looking at him across the table. Across the shoulder of slaughtered lamb and the skewers of souvlaki and the lamb casserole, no less slaughtered, and the meat-free stuffed tomatoes Plant had ordered, and the Pokolbin Riesling and the salt and pepper and the wine glasses.

What did he think of what?

'Yes. Excellent,' Plant said. 'A great improvement.'

Huxter glowered.

Angela Dark tittered.

'Though they've always been good,' Plant added.

'Have a drink,' said Angela, topping up his glass.

He drank. Deep, like drowning.

What was he doing here? This was insanity. How had he knowingly let himself fall in with these people? Feeling as he did about them. When he'd agreed to lunch he must have been thinking of the long lost good times when a long lunch with top journalists might have been something he would have looked forward to. When the future was one of growth and development and excitement and creativity. Scintillating conversation. Political secrets. Hot news.

'I just got back,' said Sperrit. 'The Philippines,' he specified, since no one asked him. Interviewing some famous figure. Criminal or politician or movie star or all three in one. 'Met this amazing whore. Unbelievable. A contact set it up for me. Never known a night like it.'

He gazed dreamy-eyed at the war memorial in the park.

'Put your trust in latex,' said Angela. 'And hope you're not heart attack country. Not that it isn't the best way to go. Ninety-eight per cent of surveyed doctors voted if they had to go it would be by heart attack.'

'What do they mean, *if* they have to go?' asked Huxter. 'Do they think they're immortal?'

'They have found the elixir of life and they are keeping it a secret to themselves,' said Sperrit. 'So have I. You just don't see women like that over here.'

'And you're still breathing,' said Angela.

'I already had a heart attack,' said Sperrit.

'Who were you bonking?' asked Angela. 'Or is it public knowledge?'

'I was masturbating, actually,' said Sperrit. 'Suddenly stars, flashes, pain, oblivion.'

'That auto-eroticism stuff's dangerous,' said Huxter. 'Hanging. Strangulation. Plastic bags.'

'I was only jerking off,' said Sperrit.

'I bet you say that to all the girls,' said Angela.

He burrowed around in his bag and came up with a cigar, sniffed it, brandished it around.

'Rolled on her thighs?' asked Huxter.

Sperrit bit off the end and lit it.

The waiter strode across with a weary, tragically weary, inevitability.

'I am sorry, no cigars.'

'We're in the smoking area,' said Sperrit.

'No more,' said the waiter.

Sperrit took a suck.

'Five thousand, five hundred dollars fine,' said the waiter. 'Five thousand to the restaurant, five hundred to you.'

Sperrit did the calculations.

'Five hundred's five hundred,' he said, slowly stubbing out the cigar on his plate.

'Well, there isn't any ashtray, is there?' he said.

'We haven't complained,' said Angela.

'You're lucky you didn't set off the smoke alarms and activate the sprinkler system,' said Huxter.

'We had this shower together,' said Sperrit. 'Did I tell you? She was unbelievable.'

'Fucking psycho,' said Huxter, stabbing his knife into the dead flesh.

Hours later Sperrit leaned across to Plant and seized his arm.

'Come and have a drink,' he said.

'I thought we were going to the movies,' said Angela.

'Later,' said Sperrit. 'Let's have a drink first.'

'Yes, let's,' said Angela.

'I'll phone this man and put him off,' said Sperrit. 'Don't want to see him anyway. They want me to write a piece on homelessness. Vagrants getting murdered. I don't see the story in it. Who cares?'

He took out his mobile and phoned.

The waiter came over. Terminally mournful.

'I am sorry. But the phone.'

'My mobile,' said Sperrit. 'Yes.'

'Not in here, please,' said the waiter.

'I can't believe it,' said Sperrit.

'There should be more of it,' said Angela. 'Life should be a romance uninterrupted by the call of phones.'

'I'll drink to that,' said Plant.

Two

They went down in the lift together. One of those little eternities in a small room the poets used to write about. Huxter said he was going back to the office and sped off. Not even a 'Nice to meet you' to Plant. Sperrit led the way down towards Central Railway. Another time warp. A pub unchanged since the fifties, or thirties even, maybe twenties. It was deserted in the mid afternoon.

'Get a bottle, darling,' said Angela.

Sperrit began protracted negotiations with the bar staff.

'What are you up to these days?' Angela asked.

The easy familiarity of the female journalist. As if she'd always known him and always would.

'Oh,' said Plant, 'a bit of this and a bit of that.'

She grinned. A fearful, frightful crocodile of old Nile grin.

'Open to offers,' he said.

Waiting for the button to light up. The prize to pour out. It didn't.

'Investigations?' she said.

Plant nodded and handed her his card.

Research assistance. Investigative reporting.

'You're teaching over at that place?'

'Teaching?'

'The Writers' Centre.'

'Oh. Yes. Yes, I have done. You could call it that. Just the occasional workshop.'

He had picked up a few dollars running a writing workshop. Investigative reporting. For the money. Why else? Writing was just writing. You either did it or you didn't. He could never see

why you needed to go to workshops. You wrote if you got paid. If you didn't get paid you did something else. Like write for posterity. Or run writing workshops.

'You ever come across someone called Dorritt?'

Plant was not especially good at remembering names. He would never have made a politician. But he tried. He sat there and thought. As far as he could remember he had never come across anyone called Dorritt. But he didn't say that. It was getting late in the afternoon and no work had been offered but this was about the time people like this lot started getting to the point. If he said he'd never come across someone called Dorritt that could be the end of it.

'Tell me,' he said.

'He's been doing some sort of course at the Writers' Centre,' said Angela. 'He's sent us a piece.'

'Oh yes,' said Plant.

'Funny stuff,' said Angela.

'Comedy?' said Plant.

'Not really,' she said.

Plant waited.

Sperrit came over with a bottle of red and three glasses. He poured them all drinks and sipped and slurped away, holding up his glass to the inspissated gloom.

'Nothing like a good old red,' he said.

'Nothing at all,' said Angela.

'Don't see too many these days. All dead and buried. They ripped out most of the old vines,' he said.

'Is that a good thing or a bad thing?' Angela asked.

Sperrit grunted.

Plant waited.

'I was telling Plant about that Dorritt piece.'

Sperrit grunted some more.

'What's it about?' Plant asked.

Angela looked at Sperrit.

'The man's bonkers,' said Sperrit. 'Claims he went bonkers and was recruited for the secret service.'

'Was he?' Plant asked.

'Of course not,' said Sperrit. 'The man's a certified maniac.'

'Are you publishing it?' Plant asked Angela.

'You must be joking,' said Sperrit.

'It might make a good lifestyle piece,' said Plant.

'He didn't send it to lifestyle,' said Angela.

'Who did he send it to?' Plant asked.

'One of the other editors,' she said.

'Which one?'

'Huxter actually.'

'It doesn't sound like arts pages stuff.'

'It isn't.'

'What did he say, exactly?' Plant asked. For want of something to say. He couldn't see where this was leading. But it was leading somewhere. Otherwise he wouldn't have been sitting in this hellhole drinking an unnecessary bottle of heavy dry red with these two uncommunicative souls. No doubt the pub featured in the guide to literary Sydney. Henry Lawson drank here. Jack London slept here. Robert Louis Stevenson spat here. But there was no reason he had to drink here. Or rather, there was a reason he was drinking here and they were taking their time telling him.

'So what did he say?'

Sperrit looked over his shoulder. Like in the World War 2 posters. Careless talk costs lives. It was the sort of pub where you wouldn't be surprised to find the posters still there. Curling on the wall. Maybe Sperrit was looking round for one.

'It's a security matter,' Sperrit said.

'Really? I thought you said it was nonsense.'

He backed off. 'Of course it's nonsense. The man's obviously a rabid fantasist. Fevered imagination. But when people start making idiotic claims like this, it has to be dealt with. Bad for public confidence.'

Plant nodded.

It was going to take a long time. World War 3 might come and go before they could bring themselves to tell him.

'So this piece he sent in. . . .'

'Claimed he'd been in the madhouse,' said Angela. 'Then he took a writing as therapy course at the Writers' Centre and cured himself. Now he's going to write the full story.'

'Which is?' Plant asked.

'How he went mad and imagined he was recruited by the secret service,' said Sperrit.

'The other way round,' said Angela Dark. 'Got recruited and it sent him mad.'

'One or the other,' said Sperrit. 'It's not important.'

'Yes, it is,' she said.

'Bullshit it is.'

Sperrit the political speechwriter, Plant reflected, all the resources of the language of Shakespeare and Patrick White at his command.

'If he went mad first nobody would take any notice of what he says happened,' said Angela.

'Nobody's going to take any notice anyway,' said Sperrit.

'If he went mad after he'd been recruited he might be up for compensation,' said Plant.

'Pigs,' said Sperrit.

'It might look bad,' said Angela.

'Look bad for who?' said Sperrit.

'For whom,' said Angela.

'It depends whether there's more than one person involved,' said Plant.

They looked at him, savagely.

'Whether you use who or whom,' he said.

'Yes, darling,' said Angela. 'It could look bad for the secret service,' she said.

'I don't believe a word of it,' said Sperrit.

'Nor do I, for that matter,' said Angela.

But Plant knew they did. Otherwise they wouldn't have dragged him down there. And Angela wouldn't have been offering him a per diem to have a word with Dorritt. Arts page stuff or not.

'And expenses?' Plant reminded her.

'Approved first,' she said.

'Naturally.'

'I'll fix it all up with Huxter,' she said. 'He's handling the arrangements. You report to him.'

'So what exactly do you want me to do?' Plant asked.

'We've sort of lost track of Dorritt since he sent the piece in.'

'And you want to run it.'

'No, heavens no. We just want to track him down and have a word with him.'

'So you want me to find him.'

'Missing persons stuff,' said Sperrit.

Plant took himself back home. The apartment he called home. He looked at it distastefully and lay back in his uncomfortable armchair and closed his eyes and let the lunch settle down and the wine with it.

So why was Huxter hiring him? And keeping himself distant and getting Angela Dark to set the job up? And why was Sperrit keeping a watch on what she said and correcting the details? If Dorritt's revelations were damaging to the secret service, surely the secret service had ways of dealing with the problem. Of course, Huxter might be secret service under journalistic cover. He wouldn't be the first one. Or the last. But if it was secret service business, he wouldn't need to be hiring an outsider.

And Huxter and Angela clearly had no intentions of publishing Dorritt's revelations. So it could hardly be

newspaper business. If that was what it was, they could have arranged that easily themselves. But they didn't want to put it through the office. They didn't want to have any official paperwork attached to it. There was clearly something more involved. Perhaps not clearly, perhaps obscurely would be the more accurate term.

It had to be personal. There had to be some personal connection between Dorritt and Huxter, and maybe between Angela and Sperrit and Dorritt.

He brooded on it some more until the wine took over and he fell asleep, uncomfortably, twitching in his uncomfortable armchair. He woke up feeling horrible. He wondered if it was a portent of the way things were going to develop. He thought it probably was. When in doubt, expect the worst.

Three

Plant went out to the Writers' Centre. He liked the lugubrious environment of the downsized mental hospital. The art school was in the original Gothic insane asylum, though you couldn't call it that now. The Writers' Centre was a fine old 1840s mansion, restored in official heritage colours. The croquet lawn had been asphalted into a car park. But the vine alley, the magnolias, the jacarandas, the palm trees, and the fire hydrant remained, giving it a timeless feel, lost in space too, some time, somewhere beyond the British Raj, out in the British Diaspora.

He could have phoned. It was not that Plant was phobic about phones. That way he would be entirely unemployable. But not to be phobic didn't mean you had to like them. Not as far as he was concerned. You never knew who was recording you. For staff training purposes. You never knew who was listening in, some secretary's office, some switchboard, some other office.

Besides, he needed to get out of the house. That was what they said. Get out of the house. Be a man. Play the game. All authorities and many subversives agreed it was good to get out of the house. Especially if it was a studio apartment. Besides again, he didn't have a lot else to do.

'Charles Dorritt,' Plant said.

'He's not here today,' said the director. Power dressed fit to rival Angela Dark. Black lightweight wool suit, white silk shirt. Black hair, blond streaks.

He hadn't expected Dorritt would be there. He had been going to try and finagle an address or a phone number. But if

Dorritt wasn't there today that meant he was here other days. Didn't it?

'He's here sometimes, though?'

'He's one of our volunteers.'

'Volunteers?'

'They help us out. Members, work for the dole, community service, corrective service, work experience.'

'Quite a crew,' said Plant.

'We can't run everything with only two fulltime staff.'

'No,' agreed Plant.

He could hear the signs. It was heading for an all too well rehearsed harangue on funding and office management.

'What days does he come in?'

She looked at Plant dubiously.

'I can't remember offhand and I'm too busy to look it up but if you want I can pass a message along to him to phone you.'

Plant handed over his card. Research assistance, investigative reporting.

'Here, have one of mine,' she said.

He took it. How could you refuse someone's card?

'You can't give me his number?'

'We respect our members' privacy. We don't give out phone numbers or addresses.'

'I taught a course here,' said Plant.

'So you did. A lot of people do. But you're not a volunteer.'

'I can't afford to be a volunteer. I need to be paid.'

'If you were a volunteer you wouldn't need to ask. You could look him up on the computer.'

'I'll start now,' said Plant.

That was how Plant became a volunteer. And gave his best to the Writers' Centre, for a couple of hours. Putting out chairs for the evening's event. And then setting up the bar. He served himself a beer.

The director handed him a copy of the monthly magazine.

'You can read all about him,' she said. 'While you take your break.'

A bespectacled, bearded, puzzled face gazed from the cover. Charles Dorritt on Writing as Therapy. Turn to page five for story.

Plant turned to page five.

SECRET AGENT TELLS ALL by CHARLES DORRITT

This is the story of how I went mad but recovered my sanity through writing as therapy. By writing down what had happened to me I came to terms with my recruitment by the secret service and those years of spying on my fellow citizens.

I had been enjoying university. So when my supervisor called me in to tell me my time had run out, I was shocked. I asked if he couldn't get me more time but he said that was it. He could not recommend a renewal of my funding. I am sure he could have, had he wished. But he had other things in mind.

I didn't.

'What will you do?' he asked me.

'I don't know,' I said.

'Do you have any ideas?' he asked.

'No.'

'I might be able to help,' he said.

That was how I was recruited for the secret service.

It was a library job to begin with. Like research again. Compiling lists. Getting a system going. An entry on each item for the database. But that was only the beginning. That was creating the directory. After that it was going out and surveilling different people. And tracking down groups that were not traceable through the libraries.

Writing down lists in the library I was prepared for. I had been a researcher. But out in the field, as they called it, was very different. I was never properly trained for it. I never imagined it would lead to kidnapping, torture, drug abuse and sex slavery.

I often think of my supervisor who introduced me to the secret world. Did such things happen to him? One day I asked him. That was when they locked me away.

For years I was incapacitated. It was beginning to write that saved me. I took a writing as therapy class and slowly, through the written word, I was able to confront the horrors that had occurred. They are what I have begun to write down. They are the story that at last I can tell.

'He's quite a tease,' said Plant.

'He always seems nervous to me,' said the director. 'He used to be such a sweetie.'

'No contradiction in that,' said Plant. 'This piece' – he tapped it with his hand – 'it has all this secret service and sex slave and drugs and torture and kidnapping stuff, but no detail.'

'No,' agreed the director.

'It's not exactly riveting.'

'I'm sure you could find something riveting in the library,' she said. 'We have all sorts of crime fiction in there.'

'No, this will do fine,' said Plant. 'It's just that it seems to go out of its way avoid any specifics.'

'I think that's the point, probably,' she said. 'He doesn't want to give too much away. It's intended as a sort of advertisement.'

'An advertisement? For what?'

'For his story. For someone to buy it. A publisher. Or a newspaper. Or an agent.'

'An agent?'

'A literary agent.'

'Oh.'

She gave a Mata Hari smile. 'You're thinking of secret agents, are you?' she said. 'You think they would be interested in buying world rights?'

'I imagine they might,' said Plant.

'I don't know how Charley would feel about that,' she said. She turned back to her desk.

'Before I leave,' he said.

'Yes,' said the director.

'The computers. Dorritt's number.'

'The computers are down,' she said.

Plant gave his best disbelieving smile.

She smiled back. Her best inscrutable one.

'But I gave him a call. He said he'd phone you tomorrow morning.'

'Thank you,' he said.

'You're welcome.'

'I could have spoken to him when you called him,' he said. 'Saved him from having to phone me.'

'I said you were busy doing volunteer work and I didn't want to interrupt you,' she said. 'He understood. He knows we're short staffed.'

'That was very understanding of him,' said Plant.

'Wasn't it!' she said brightly.

'The magazine,' said Plant. 'When did it come out?'

'A couple of weeks ago.'

'And how many do you print?'

'Three thousand.'

'And who sees it?'

'Everybody sees it,' she said.

'But specifically?'

'Our members and the media and libraries. They're mailed out by volunteers. The next mailing will be in a couple of weeks' time. You might like to come along. That way you might get to sneak a look at the mailing list.'

'I'll think about it,' said Plant.

'Before you leave,' she said, 'you might put a few chairs out on the verandah.'

He put out a few chairs, and left.

He thought about a lot of things on the way back. Like the resources of our great newsgathering media groups. They seemed not to have noticed Dorritt's story was already in print. Even though it had been mailed to them. Then he thought about things like torture, drugs, kidnapping and sex slavery. And how Huxter and Angela and Sperrit hadn't mentioned any of that. Torture, drugs, kidnapping, or sex slavery. Was that what they were worried about? Or someone was worried about? The reason they could hardly bring themselves to give him any data at all?

Four

The phone rang.

'Yes,' said Plant.

'Is that Mr Plant?'

He made his non-committal grunt.

'I had a call from the Writers' Centre.'

It seemed to require another grunt.

'I heard you wanted to get in touch with me.'

'You're. . .?' Plant said. As if he was always having people call. People he'd asked to get in touch with him.

'I'm Charles Dorritt.'

'Ah, yes,' said Plant.

He wrote down Dorritt's number from the visual display. Then he would put it through the computer program that gave you the address. It was fun playing with your toys once in a while.

'I was out at the Centre,' said Plant. 'I came across your story.'

'It's not a story,' said Dorritt. 'It's all true. It's not fiction.'

'No, I didn't mean story in that sense,' said Plant.

'In what sense did you mean it?' Dorritt asked.

'I suppose like in a newspaper story.'

'Are you in newspapers?'

'In a sort of way.'

Wrapped up in them to keep out the chill of underemployment.

'What sort of way is that?'

'Oh, a good way,' said Plant.

'That would be interesting,' said Dorritt. 'Is there such a thing?'

'Maybe we could meet and talk about it.'

There was a silence. Not especially convincing, but still a silence.

'We could do that,' said Dorritt.

'Let's do it then,' said Plant.

It took a while. Plant suggested the Writers' Centre, but Dorritt refused.

'Can't be too careful,' Dorritt said. 'I trust them. As far as I trust anybody. Any more. But there are other organisations in the building. The James Joyce Foundation. Think of all those years he spent in Trieste. What was he doing there? International PEN. They're very suspect, historically. The Guild of Bookbinders. They could provide cover for anything. You can never be sure. The Children's Book Council. . . .'

Plant said he meant the grounds. The flowering trees. No microphones there.

But what about listening vans in the car park? Or satellite surveillance on these cloudless days?

'I think I'd rather go to a pub,' said Dorritt.

He suggested the Lord Nelson in the Rocks.

'They brew their own beer. You can see the vats in the back.'

The convict-hewn stone walls and painted wooden panelling advertised authenticity. Nautical looking flags hung from the roof beams. So did a number of brass lanterns, a disturbingly large barrel, and a couple of television sets. Dorritt rubbed his hand along the brass bar rail in evident satisfaction. He was hard to get a fix on. All hair and moustache and beard and glasses, as if it was all part of a single ensemble and could be lifted away, false beard, moustache, nose, glasses in one go. To reveal what?

It was not a face in repose. It twitched. Not madly. But often enough. And the rest of the time it was screwed up in anguish, various anguishes, the anguish of getting the precise word, of getting any word, of just speaking. And thinking.

Thinking what might be said produced its own contractions and constrictions. The red braces, suspenders, whatever they were called, streamed down like some insignia, the surgeon's pole, the barber's shop, the Knights Templar, an assassin from the Old Man of the Mountain. Dorritt loved them, clearly. The way he kept feeling them, twanging them.

'I loved the old student life,' said Dorritt. 'Drinking beer in dark old pubs. Singing songs.'

'Singing songs?' said Plant in disgust. Before he could stop himself.

'Drinking songs,' said Dorritt. '*Gaudeamus igitur*.'

He sang a few bars.

'This doesn't have quite the ambience. But it's good. Nonetheless. You might think it's a tourist pub. There are tourists.'

There were, reflected Plant.

'But sometimes there aren't any. Then there are office parties.'

Whoopee, thought Plant.

'But quite often it's quiet. I sit here with my thoughts. And a welcome ale. Or two.' He laughed. 'It's the oldest pub in the city. The closest we come to Gothic. Don't you love the Gothic? Dr Arnold's schools. *Tom Brown at Oxford*. Fencing clubs. Duelling scars. So you can imagine how I felt, working for my doctorate, all those years, to be told that that was it. Finished.'

He gave his nervous laugh. Again.

Was it meant to be ingratiating?

Plant refused the plea.

But at the same time it was anxious, nervously aware of how lacking in the skills of ingratiation it was.

'Later,' Dorritt said, 'I heard stories of how all the secret services poach bright students. Skim off the people they want, tell them the diplomatic corps, or whatever they applied for has rejected them. What can you do?'

Plant read the list of ales available chalked up above the bar. Quayle Ale 4%. Trafalgar Pale Ale 4.2%. Three Sheets 5%. Old Admiral 6.7%. Victory Bitter 4.5%. Nelson's Blood 4.5%. A Japanese man in a navy blue suit with a camera round his neck was reading them too. He grinned, a contented Japanese grin.

'Huh, most humorous,' he said contentedly.

Plant nodded. He gave a smile. He couldn't think of any words. Behind the bar a chalked notice exhorted 'We expect everyone to do their duty'. England and man suitably excised from the historical text in the interests of republican, feminist correctness.

'Like kookaburra. Most comical.'

Plant raised his glass in salute to the kookaburras.

'And duck-billed platypus. That I find comical too. A funny country.'

'I love a fun-burnt country,' said Plant.

'Hah,' said the Japanese.

'The land of the rising fun,' Plant added.

The Japanese asked if he could take a photograph of them. Dorritt hid his head in his hands. The Japanese was delighted.

'Convict, huh?'

'So you were made an offer,' said Plant.

'Yes. You could put it like that,' said Dorritt. 'It was all very, you know.'

Plant waited.

'I'm not sure I do know,' he said at last.

'Oblique.'

'Oblique.'

'Indirect. Circuitous,' said Dorritt.

'I know the word,' said Plant. 'But how did they do it? Or is that an official secret and you signed some Official Secrets Act?'

'I suppose I did,' said Dorritt.

'Don't you remember?'

'No,' said Dorritt.

Plant could believe that. So many things you signed you didn't want to remember. So much best forgotten.

'I have trouble remembering.'

'Ah.'

'After what happened to me.'

'And what was that?'

'I'll come to it. I have to tell this in due order. Otherwise I get very confused. I start to confuse things. Even now.'

He drank down a few gulps of beer and then snuffled a smile through the foam-flecked moustache.

'You don't have to rush off or anything, do you?'

The anxiety was palpable.

Plant shook his head. As minimally as he could within the limits of effective communication. It was enough.

'Oh, good,' said Dorritt. 'It's nice to have company again once in a while. The afternoons can be very long.'

'Those grey days,' said Plant.

'The sunny ones too,' said Dorritt. 'They are often the worst. All that light. All that warmth. All that beauty and energy. Which you've lost. Which you'll never get back again.'

From the back of the room came a contented Japanese guffaw.

'What my supervisor said was, he had a research project. And funding, that was it. And he could offer me a position as a research assistant on the project. At more money than my scholarship had been. Which I didn't have any more.'

'How much more money?' asked Plant. He had an interest in such things.

'I don't know.'

He looked at Plant, candidly, surprised.

'I never thought about it. And I can't remember now. It probably wasn't that much more. But it made a difference. I

was more comfortable. I remember that. And the travel was all paid for. And staying in places. So all those anxieties were gone. It seemed like a new world. Or an old one. Entering an old one. The old one my supervisor lived in. That book-lined room. The tweed jacket. The leather patches. The pipe. The smell of the tobacco he smoked. The half-spectacles. It was all that clubman atmosphere. Richard Hannay. John Buchan. John Le Carré. Imperial Leather shaving cream. The glass of sherry. The second glass of sherry. Winking at the brim. All so masculine.'

He stopped, and tittered.

'All in your supervisor's university office.'

'Room,' said Dorritt. 'Professor Oates always called it his room. Never his office. It was part of that old world' – he groped for the word – 'charm.'

It wrapped round them there in the old world pub.

'Later,' said Dorritt, 'I was more resentful. Later I realised he was no more than a secret service puppet. Thwarting the careers of those who wanted to become diplomats or scholars by funnelling them into the secret world. Keener on his supply of young flesh than any academic rewards. I believe I could have become an excellent historian. I believe he knew that. That was why he discontinued my PhD and recruited me.'

'Did your professor actually say this was a secret service project?'

'Oh no,' said Dorritt. 'He wouldn't have, would he? Not if it was secret.'

'You didn't actually meet anyone from any secret service?' Plant asked.

'Oh, I've no doubt he was secret service.'

'But he was the only person you dealt with?'

'I think I might have met someone some other time who might have been.'

'Might have been.'

‘Might have been overlooking the project. Or might have been Professor Oates’s control. I didn’t really think about it at the time.’

He stopped. Picked up his beer glass and put it to his furry lips. It was already empty.

‘Another?’ said Plant.

‘Yes, please,’ said Dorritt.

‘You see,’ said Dorritt, sucking into his fresh pint, like Neptune on a foam-flecked sea, or Rex Marinus, the shipwrecked king of alchemy, ‘I’m not writing that sort of book. Not a detailed date-by-date record. It’s a more personal sort of account.’

He took a deep swig.

‘It’s more a memoir. A lot of it was happy times. I don’t only write about the bad times. That could have bad therapeutic implications. I found I had to liberate myself into writing about the good times too. Happy days.’

He fixed Plant with two beady eyes.

‘Happy days,’ he said. ‘Why can’t the happy days be here again?’

Five

'So what sort of things were you doing?' Plant asked. 'Missions. Is that what they called them?'

'Missions,' said Dorritt. 'Maybe. It sounds right. I only ever did the one, as it happened. Then I had my breakdown. When I came out of hospital I went to see Professor Oates. But he wasn't at the university any more. He'd retired. And that was it. I tried ringing the secret service. I got the number from the phone book. They're listed under ASIO. But they didn't want to know about me.'

'What was the mission?' Plant asked.

'It was a survey of the alternative press,' said Dorritt. 'Underground papers. Independent publishers. Political newsletters. All that area. It was actually quite fascinating. In all sorts of ways. Hand printing. Hand-made papers. I used to love the textures. And the design. Little poetry chapbooks. And the comics. The bold garishness of them. The colours. I used to love the book fairs. All these stalls. All this weirdness. Books on drugs. Books on politics. Books on Zen. Self-help books. Amputee comics.'

'And you were writing it all down?'

'It's the sort of information a government needs to have. What's being published. Who's publishing it. Who's collecting it. Who are the people involved.'

He looked across at Plant keenly.

'The files on the bibliophiles,' he said proudly. It was a phrase he must have been working on. 'I don't have any regrets. Not about the project.'

'Even though it was a secret service project.'

'I couldn't say that, could I? Obviously. I didn't know for sure, anyway. And I was sworn to secrecy.'

'If you were sworn to secrecy didn't that imply that there were secrets? Didn't that suggest that you were working for the secret service?'

'If I was sworn to secrecy. I imagine I was. But I can't remember taking the oath. '

'The imagination,' said Plant.

'It's very important in memoirs,' said Dorritt. 'Just as in imaginative fiction. Imaginative memoirs.'

He tittered, wiped his moustache with his furry sleeve, wiped the smile off his furry face. Anxiety resumed possession, dictating the configurations.

'I enjoyed it,' said Dorritt. 'I got to meet writers. Poets. Dadaists. Amazing parties in houses on the waterfront. Amazing drugs. Theatre people. Performance artists. Cabarets. Girls. I was going to propose a project on the music industry next. Groupies. Plaster-casters. That would have been great fun. That was what I was thinking of when it all went wrong.

'It was an extraordinary time. For years there had been such conservatism. Such repression. And then suddenly, naked breasts on poetry magazines. One minute it was pornography and *Playboy*. The next minute it was art, counterculture, naked breasts everywhere. The beach. On stage. Parties. The parties.

'I remember trying to argue that girlie magazines should be included in the project. That they published important new writing. But people were funny about them. That's how repressive it was. Then suddenly everything was allowed.

'I enjoyed it. You're not allowed to say that now. Now they say you have a prurient unwelcome gaze. But it happened. It was history. They can't be allowed to deny the thrill of it. They can never take that away.'

He was impassioned, the table shaking as he brought down a firm, emphatic fist. Their knees and ankles were awash with Trafalgar pale ale.

Plant turned a blind eye.

The Japanese went past and slipped on the spilled drink. He fell to the ground and lay there. Dorritt leaped up and knelt beside him, bumping the table and spilling more beer. He felt for the man's heart, took a deep breath and prepared for mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

'Kiss me, Hardy,' said the Japanese.

Dorritt hesitated.

'Most humorous,' said the Japanese. He handed his camera to Plant to be photographed there, lying beneath Dorritt's ministrations. Dorritt burrowed into the jacket of the prostrate Japanese, hiding his face, his backside sticking up into the air.

'Like ostrich, huh?' said the Japanese.

So there was Dorritt, bumbling his way through the seventies, his glasses steamed up insecurely on his nose, his hair growing longer and shaggier, then suddenly shorn, veering between his identifying with his more alternative subjects or with his systems mentality backers. If, indeed, there were such backers. He went out there with his index cards, knocking on doors like a lone Mormon, the dark suit, the practical shoes. The small presses welcomed him in, have a coffee, have a tea, have a seat, have a joint, let's see how we can publicise ourselves to you, should sell a few more books, shouldn't it?

That was when his titter came in. As far as he could see the project would never sell any books. But if he published it as a directory. . . But there again who would publish it? Did any of the small presses he visited have the resources to do it, the marketing to sell it, how many people would want to buy it anyway?

He veered between a huge enthusiasm for the project, caught up in the self-promoting inflation of the small press publishers and the poets and the performance artists, and an appalled but consistent sense of the sales figures for most of these operations. A book like that would sell two hundred copies. Five hundred at most. No, two hundred. Could he

find someone to take it on? Then he could cite it as a major publication and get back into the university. He was caught up by the small press frenzy, turn everything into a book, specialist printers, small runs, hand binding. He had his dreams in those years of dreams. He wasn't the straight outsider looking in. That was just the cover. For the secret investigation he really undertook. Which in its turn was cover for his new concern. His identification with his subject. He was as caught up as any of them in it all.

Books. Magazines. Underground papers. Alternative fairs. Marquees hot in the summer sun. Trestle tables of print. Comics. Magazines. Jugglers. Clowns. Mute mime artists. Performing bears. And the girls. How had it turned so bad?

'There were political papers, of course. All the various fractions of the left. They were easy to find out about. They all had offices. Mastheads listing their editors. That made the work a lot easier for me. Amazing really. You'd think they would have tried to make it more difficult. Tried to conceal who they were if they really were oppositional. And then there were the come-and-go alternative papers. Dope magazines. Hippy sort of things. Guerilla action. Drug consciousness. No fixed address.'

He shuddered, as if a chill breeze had blown across the harbour through the Lord Nelson. Or the ghosts of old memories stirred in the cellars below, rattling their chains.

'Who do you represent, Mr Plant?' Dorritt asked.

'I represent the newspaper group to which you sent an outline of your story.'

'Are you an employee?'

'I am employed by them.'

'But you are not on staff.'

'No,' said Plant.

'Who exactly employed you? The company? The editor? Who's paying the bill?'

'Does it make a difference?'

'Of course it makes a difference,' said Dorritt.

'I'll have to see when the cheque comes in.'

'You will,' said Dorritt. 'And let me know, won't you.'

'Why would I do that?'

'Because I imagine you want my co-operation.'

'I want everyone's co-operation,' said Plant.

'I'm not sure that you do,' said Dorritt. 'You wouldn't like it if you got it, I'm sure of that. You have to learn to discriminate.'

Six

'I feel the waiter is getting to know me,' said Plant.

'And not liking what he sees,' said Sperrit.

'All his passion is reserved for you, darling,' said Angela.

'Don't talk to me about passion,' said Sperrit.

'Is that the title of your memoirs?' said Huxter.

'My daughter turned up at the weekend,' said Sperrit

'I didn't know you had a daughter,' said Angela.

'Nor did I,' said Sperrit.

'And how old is she?' asked Angela.

'Twenty-something.'

'Twenty-something?' said Huxter.

'Too old for you, darling,' said Angela.

'Luckily my wife was out,' said Sperrit.

'So you could bonk her,' said Angela.

'So she doesn't know she exists,' said Sperrit.

'Doesn't she know?'

'No one knows.'

'Knew,' said Huxter. 'Now you've told us.'

'Her mother must have known,' said Angela.

'I suppose so,' said Sperrit.

'Who was the mother? Anyone you knew?'

'My wife's best friend.'

'Your wife's best friend.'

'It only happened once,' said Sperrit.

'Lucky she's in her twenties and you don't have to fork out maintenance. Like for all the others.'

'I could always challenge it,' said Sperrit. 'Have a DNA test.'

'You did that last time.'

'I don't believe them,' said Sperrit. 'I think the doctors were suborned.'

'Why don't you have it cut off?' said Huxter.

'My wife tried,' said Sperrit.

'But couldn't find it,' said Angela.

'You ready to order?' said the waiter, with grim distaste.

'I'd like a stifado,' said Angela, lubriciously.

'I'll give you one,' said Sperrit.

'One beef stew with onions,' said the waiter.

'Balls,' said Sperrit, 'give a man meatballs. In egg and lemon sauce.'

'One youvarlakia avgolemono.'

Huxter ordered lamb with eggplant.

'One arnaki me melitzanes.'

'Spinach pie,' said Plant, feeling like a vulnerable lamb amongst the ravening carnivores.

'One spanakopita.'

'This little spook of yours,' said Huxter.

Of mine, thought Plant.

'What's he have to say for himself?'

Plant handed an A4 envelope across the table.

'What's this?'

'The Writers' Centre magazine.'

'What do I want this shit for?'

'You are arts editor, darling,' said Angela.

Huxter snarled and dropped it on the ground.

'It's got Dorritt's piece in it,' said Plant.

'It's what? It's got what? Show me.'

He leaned over to pick it up and crashed his head into Plant, who had politely leaned over to pick it up.

Eschew politeness amongst barbarians and journalists, Plant reminded himself.

Huxter ripped open the envelope and tore through the pages.

'How did this happen? How did this get out? You were supposed to fucking stop this.'

That was news to Plant, but he said nothing. He rubbed his head and checked his teeth with his tongue in case he'd cracked any.

'It's been out a couple of weeks,' Plant said. 'Before I was hired.'

'How can that be?' Huxter raged. 'This should have been killed.'

'There's not much in it,' said Plant. 'I don't think he's scooped you.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'I try my best,' said Plant.

'Why would we want to run this sort of shit?'

'So there's no problem,' said Plant.

'Of course there's a problem. This should never have happened. Why wasn't I told?'

'They mailed you a copy,' Plant said.

'I can't be expected to read all the shit I get mailed,' said Huxter.

He did a quick scan of Dorritt's piece and threw it to the ground again. Sperrit picked it up and studied it.

'This is a disaster,' Huxter said.

'It's not that bad,' said Plant.

'It's a catastrophe.'

'It's been out two weeks and no one's commented on it,' said Sperrit. 'No one's picked it up. Not that I've seen. If nothing's happened in two weeks it's already been forgotten.'

'That's true,' said Huxter. 'Possibly.'

He poured himself a glass of retsina from the carafe and gulped it down.

'Filthy stuff,' he said. 'Why doesn't somebody order some decent wine?'

'It reminds me of happy times in Greece,' said Angela Dark.

'Fuck happy times,' said Huxter.

'I did whenever I could,' said Angela.

Sperrit clicked his fingers and signalled the waiter. The waiter glowered back and busied himself arranging table settings.

'There's nothing in it,' said Plant. 'Nothing substantial. It's just a tease for what he's going to write.'

'Going to write?' Huxter hissed.

He clearly wanted to shout with rage but at the same time avoid being overheard by the other lunch guests. He hissed like an old steam engine at a station, that blast of steam to deafen you for the day.

'Says he's going to,' said Plant. 'He might never do it.'

'He might well not,' said Sperrit.

'Why wouldn't he?' asked Huxter.

'He might think better of it,' said Sperrit.

Huxter grunted.

'What's he threatening to write?' asked Sperrit.

'Apparently he plans to start with his recruitment by the secret service, and then get into all the kidnapping, torture, drugging and sex slavery,' said Plant.

'Torrid stuff,' said Sperrit.

'What I'm not sure about,' said Plant, 'is whether he's saying he kidnapped, tortured, drugged and sexually enslaved on behalf of the secret service. Or whether he's saying it happened to him.'

'It's immaterial,' said Huxter.

'I'm not sure about that,' Plant began, but Angela Dark cut across him.

'Sex slavery,' she said. 'Who would ever want to enslave that little weasel?'

'Do you know him?' Plant asked.

'Sex slavery my arse,' said Huxter.

'Might fetch a price,' said Sperrit. 'In the Emirates.'

'You've been there?' said Huxter. 'You'd know all about them.'

'Hot,' said Sperrit. 'Very hot there.'

'Hot for what, darling?' asked Angela Dark.

Plant sipped his retsina while the badinage went on. They were putting so much into it.

'I'll order that wine,' said Angela, getting up and going across to the waiter. The waiter threw his hands open at the indecorum of it. She read through the wine list.

'What does he claim he was doing?' Huxter asked.

'He was assembling a file on our free press,' said Plant.

'Claims he was,' said Sperrit.

'I don't call that rubbish the free press,' said Huxter.

'Which rubbish would that be?' Plant asked.

'The rubbish he was writing his dossiers on. Trotskyite lies. Poetry magazines. Anarchist rags. Self-published samizdat shit.'

For someone who didn't read what came through the mail he was reasonably well informed on Dorritt's claims, Plant reflected.

'And do we have a copy of what he's written?' asked Sperrit.

'Only the magazine piece. And whatever he sent to Huxter.'

'It was just an email,' said Huxter. 'Didn't say anything. Just a threat.'

'A threat?' said Plant.

'About what he was going to write. Same as this shit.'

Sperrit tossed the magazine onto the table.

'Pretty unspecific,' he said.

'I don't know whether he's written the more detailed account or has only announced he's writing it,' said Plant.

'Well, find out,' said Huxter.

'There are problems,' said Plant.

'What problems?' said Huxter. 'Just fucking ask him.'

'It's hard to get a straight answer,' said Plant.

'Then twist his fucking arm.'

'Torture him?' asked Plant.

'I emphatically did not say that,' said Huxter. 'That is absolutely repudiated.'

'It was by way of a joke,' said Plant.

'There are no such things as jokes,' said Sperrit. 'You should know that. Someone as comical as you.'

'Just do it,' said Huxter. 'What do you think you're being paid for?'

'Like hack into his computer? Borrow his back-up files.'

'I don't want to know how you do it,' said Huxter. 'Just do it. Just find out what he's up to.'

'He doesn't seem to be up to anything. Just these memoirs.'

'We know that,' said Huxter.

Plant waited.

'Find out what he's planning to write.'

'What sort of things?'

'How would I know what sort of things?' said Huxter.

Very clearly, Plant thought, but he kept quiet. Huxter was worried about something and wasn't going to say what it was. Something that Dorritt might write. But if Dorritt in the end didn't write it, then Huxter didn't want to have said what it was. That was clear. It was also clear it was something serious. Something worrying. Something incriminating. Otherwise there would be no reason for Huxter not to tell Plant.

To find out what it was without being told or given any indication about what it might be was not the best way of going about it. Huxter knew that. He was a newspaperman. He wasn't in the business of playing games and making things difficult for no reason. Even if he did edit the arts pages. So it had to be something rather serious. Something they knew more about than they were letting on. Like Huxter knowing

Dorritt had been compiling dossiers on the alternative press and like Angela knowing Dorritt wouldn't fetch much in the sex-slave market. Something rather horrible.

'This is ridiculous,' said Huxter.

Sperrit agreed.

'It has to be stopped.'

Sperrit nodded wisely.

'Stopped now,' he said.

He thumped the table. The carafe and bottle and glasses bounced. Angela, back in her seat, bounced with them.

The waiter remained at his bar. Impassive. So many silent dawns in other seas.

'Why don't you throw a saucer over your shoulder, darling?' said Angela. 'They'd love you for that.'

'I've got a handkerchief if you want to do the handkerchief dance,' said Sperrit. He produced a classic noisome rag and waved it in the air.

The waiter cast a weary eye across.

Plant sat there. If Huxter wanted it stopped, all he had to do was buy Dorritt's memoir. World rights. Exclusive. And not run it. It wouldn't cost much. He had the most efficient method of suppression in the free world. A free press. Market values. And he wasn't using it.

'Why don't you make him an offer?' Plant suggested

'What do you take me for?' Huxter asked.

Plant forbore to reply.

'Of course I'd make him an offer if I could. He's playing silly buggers. He sends me this email but no return address.'

'No return address?' said Angela.

'Well, of course there's an address but it's the idiot Writers' Centre. It's not his own email.'

'Ask them to give you his address,' said Angela.

Huxter held the bottle in his hand as if about to brain her. Instant lobotomy. He poured himself a drink instead.

'Good thinking. I'll write a note to remind myself.'

Sperrit rested a paw on Angela's thigh. She lifted it off but it came back.

'That confounded woman at the Centre wouldn't give me an address. Or tell me whether he had email. Said she'd give him a message. By bottle in the ocean, I suppose, I said. If you want me to do it that way, I can, she said. We have water access. Smart piece.'

'But you didn't,' said Sperrit.

'No, I didn't. I hung up.'

'That was a mistake,' said Sperrit.

Huxter picked up the bottle again.

'So you did nothing and hoped it would go away,' said Sperrit. 'That was another mistake.'

Huxter poured himself more wine. He turned to Plant.

'Just find where he lives and stop this ridiculousness,' said Huxter.

Seven

Plant went round to stop Dorritt's ridiculousness. Not immediately. Not immediately after lunch. After a journalists' lunch there was never a lot of time left in the day in which to do anything. Or inclination. Anything would have had to have been done very immediately, and would not have been done well.

He called round on Dorritt the next morning, at a civilised hour, not a police-visit arrest-warrant hour, not four in the morning nor seven nor even nine. Eleven seemed about right. A single-fronted, single-storeyed little tunnel of a cottage in Leichhardt, with a paling fence and geraniums and aircraft low on their airport approach route overhead.

It seemed so right he was disappointed when Dorritt didn't potter to the door in his cardigan and offer him elevenses. But he didn't. The door was firmly unanswered. The same later in the day. He tried phoning a few times. No answer. Nor the next morning. A couple of throwaway local community papers were thrown on the porch. Current week's date. No old ones rotting in the shrubbery, so he wasn't the sort of person who just left them there. Dorritt had left town.

'Well, find him,' said Huxter, when Plant phoned in.

'I'll need travel money. Airline tickets. Car hire. Accommodation.'

'Of course.'

Plant wanted it in writing.

'Of course.'

He always asked. It was painful and rarely was anything in writing ever delivered. But you had to ask. A matter of principle. Keep things uncomfortable.

Plant stood on the verandah of the Writers' Centre, looking at the vine and the magnolia and the jacaranda and the palm trees and the bicycle chained and strapped to the fire hydrant. It had C. DORRITT painted on the crossbar in white capital letters. The director joined him. She was in tan leather jacket, denim shirt, blue jeans and R. M. Williams boots with raised heels. Another sort of power dressing. Rural sector.

'Look at that,' she said. The bicycle.

'Don't you like it?' Plant asked.

'It's an eyesore,' she said.

'I'd throw it away,' said Plant.

'Would you?'

'Or tow it away.'

'That's better. It belongs to one of our volunteers.'

Volunteers. The sacred ones.

'So I see,' he said. 'I'm trying to track him down. Name of C. Dorritt. Not at his home.'

'That's right. Charley. Are you still after him? He can't be far away. If that's his bicycle.'

'It says it is,' said Plant.

'Don't believe everything you read,' she said.

'Is that the motto of this place?'

She smiled wanly.

'I'll make a point of remembering it,' said Plant. 'He's not far away?'

'He's presumably volunteering inside.'

They went in. No sign of Dorritt. Not in the office, not in the library. The boardroom was empty. The double room was full of men and women in security guards' uniforms throwing each other to the floor and kissing each other.

'Self-defence and mouth to mouth resuscitation,' said the director. 'They hire the room. Helps our cash flow.'

The kitchen. International PEN. Children's Book Council. Guild of Bookbinders. Fellowship of Australian Writers. James

Joyce Foundation. Australian Playwrights' Guild. Screen Directors' Guild. The toilets. Nowhere. They climbed down the old stone stairs into the cellar. Her foot slipped momentarily and she held onto Plant's arm. It was a good spot for kidnapping and torture and sex slavery. Rusting metal rings were secured to the walls. Thin beams of light came through the iron grating. But there was no sign of Dorritt.

'There's nowhere else he could be?'

'No.'

'You're sure?'

'Would I lie to you?' she asked.

'How long has the bike been here?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'I've been away at the bush poets' festival. Ask one of the staff. The one of the staff. As if we had any more.'

'Two or three days,' said the one of the staff back in the office. 'It's like he wanted us to be able to keep an eye on it, make sure people could see it, or something.'

Very like, Plant reflected. That was exactly how a furry freak like Dorritt would think. I must leave a clue to show that I am not here any more. An obvious clue. Such an obvious clue no one will think to notice it for days. Such a politically correct clue that no one will erase it. Not graffiti. Nothing defacing a heritage building. But chained to a building. Better still, chained near a building. Where you can see it in comfort, out of the rain, out of the sun, from a building. That would be the thing to do. Nobody would forcibly remove a bicycle. Doesn't use fossil fuel. A car, yes. They would tow away a car. But not a bicycle. Chained to a fire hydrant. On a lawn. Not blocking any pathway. Just hope there isn't a fire. One hundred poets suffocated. Fire hydrant blocked by prose writer's bicycle.

'Not that it's the sort of bike you'd bother to steal. Funny he bothered to tie it up so securely. '

'What do you want him for?' the director asked.

Good question, thought Plant.

'That piece he wrote. It's attracted some interest.'

'His secret service story?' she said.

'Sort of,' said Plant.

He was getting infected by Huxter's evasions.

'That's good,' she said.

'Is it?'

'We like our members to be successful. Sell their stories.'

'Of course,' said Plant.

'You know what he was working on?'

'When?'

'In the secret service.'

'Tell me,' said Plant.

'Ironic really. He was compiling a directory of little magazines.'

'Ironic?' said Plant.

'We publish one here,' she said. 'Pity we weren't around then, he could have just used ours. Maybe we could say it was based on his researches and get some publicity. Or perhaps I could ask him to write an introduction to the next edition.'

'How did you know that was what he was doing?' Plant asked.

'When?'

'When he was working for the secret service.'

'He must have told me, I suppose. How else would I know?'

'That was what I was asking,' said Plant.

'No idea,' she said.

'Can I see a copy?'

'A copy?'

'Of the directory you publish.'

'Of course.'

She took one from a shelf and handed it to him.

'It's a steal at fourteen dollars ninety-five. Do yourself a favour and buy one. For your researches. It lists all the literary magazines.'

'But not the political ones.'

'There aren't any political ones left any more,' she said. 'Not like in Dorritt's time. Those days are over. But if you want an up to date directory….'

He didn't. But he could charge it to expenses.

'And this is the sort of thing Dorritt was assembling?'

'Funny, isn't it?'

'Fourth edition,' he read. 'You do it regularly.'

'Yes,' she said. 'And still no sign of any drugs or sex slaves. Even just an office slave would be a help.'

'Send a review copy to Huxter,' he said.

'That neurotic arts editor? You think so?'

'I'm sure he would be interested,' said Plant. 'Send him a personal covering note. He'd like that.'

'I'll do it now,' she said.

'Do you sell many?'

'Of course. We just had a Japanese visitor who called in especially to get one. He loved it. Went away with a great smile on his face.'

'Most comical,' said Plant.

'Yes, that was what he said. The exact phrase.'

'What else did he want?'

'He took a copy of the magazine,' she said.

'Why?' he asked. But he knew.

'He seemed to like the photograph of Charley Dorritt on the cover. He kept pointing at it and saying "Australian convict. Most comical."'

'I can believe it.'

'He wanted to know where to buy some books.'

'What sort of books?'

'Small press books.'

'Oh yes,' said Plant. 'Why?'

'He corrects them.'

'He corrects them?'

'Yes.'

'Sounds strange.'

'It does, doesn't it?' she agreed.

'What does it mean?'

'It's what he said.'

'But what does it mean?'

'I suppose he keeps them in line. Checks their spelling. Corrects their ideas.'

Plant made doubtful noises.

'Or he could be some sort of censor. Looking out for political correctness.'

'What did he actually say?' Plant asked.

'He said he was a corrector of small press books.'

'Or a collector?'

'Ah,' she said. 'Could be. I'd just assumed he was another of your sort of people.'

'My sort of people?'

'Agents.'

'I'm not a literary agent,' said Plant.

'Secret agents.'

'Nor a secret agent.'

'Well, not so secret agents, then,' she said.

'Not me,' said Plant. 'You're confusing me with Dorritt.'

She smiled at him.

'Now you mention it,' she said, 'there are similarities.'

'I hope not,' said Plant.

'I can just see you as a sex slave.'

'I have to go,' said Plant.

'Take care you don't get kidnapped,' she said.

Eight

Fullalove insisted on a gloomy pub. Dorritt had vanished, now Fullalove demanded his own world of darkness. And nothing touristy about Fullalove's world. Serious drinking. Racing on the satellite TV. Desultory activity on the poker machines. Graceless, all of it. They could be out overlooking the harbour, the ocean, the botanical gardens, the national parks. Why do I spend so much of my life in gloomy caverns when I am a spirit of light and freedom? Plant asked himself.

Fullalove asked him how he'd been. Plant's momentary uncertainty, that shift of possibilities, was irrevocable. Fullalove seized the moment and began a major narration of how he had been. Fullalove.

'Oh, no,' said Plant.

It was like standing at the edge of the surf and the water not quite warm enough and knowing you had to go under and catch your breath and shiver before you had what you wanted. There was just this moment where you wondered whether it really was what you wanted. Whether you were really a spirit of light and freedom, of the great outdoors and the open air. Waiting to be immersed by the wave of Fullalove was like this, waiting to get swamped in the appalling horror of it before acclimatising to the ambience of disaster, trapped amidst the smouldering wreckage of peacekeeping missions, locked in the abandoned laboratory of Ebola research with the air-conditioning broken down and slivers of broken test-tubes embedded in your flesh.

'So then I got myself together,' said Fullalove. 'I got this job. I was editor of this paper. This street paper. A what's-on guide really. For degenerates. Deviants. There isn't any alternative any

more. This pretended it was. I took it seriously. I should have known. Maybe I did know and I was just testing them. Pushing the limits. Psychologically, who is to say?'

'Who indeed?' said Plant.

'So I am editing this and I get out my first issue, cover story on the Labor Party cronies, big business, the CIA. Anniversary issue of the Whitlam sacking.'

'Anniversary?' said Plant. 'How many years?'

'The eleventh of the eleventh, nineteen-seventy-five,' said Fullalove. 'You work it out. You're a numbers man.'

Plant shook his head.

'A while ago,' he said.

'And the owner throws a fit, said you can't do this. I said I've done it. He looked at his watch. He knew it was too late to make up another cover story. "When you plan a story like this," he said, "you show it to me first." I said I found that unacceptable. He said "Why?" I said it infringed my editorial prerogatives. He said I didn't have any editorial prerogatives, I wasn't an editor any more.'

Fullalove gazed at the poker machines, lost in reverie.

'So what happened then?'

'So what happened then is he edits his own paper. Writes his own cover stories.'

'I meant what happened to you?'

'What do you think happened to me?' said Fullalove. 'I got fired, didn't I? Don't I always get fired?'

'It looks that way,' Plant said.

'It was a good front page,' said Fullalove. 'I'll mail you a copy.'

'You already did,' said Plant. 'That's what I wanted to see you about.'

'I'll send you another one,' said Fullalove. 'I've got thousands of them. So what did you want to see me about?'

Plant had racked his memory but could think of no one he knew who ran a small press or an independent publishing

operation or a poetry magazine. He seized on Fullalove's street paper as the closest thing to the alternative. A way in to the historic past of Dorritt's bibliographic researches.

'The alternative press,' said Plant.

'Doesn't exist,' said Fullalove. 'Look at it.' He passed a copy of a paper across from a pile at one end of the bar. Ranked bicycles swarmed across the front page.

'Cover story,' said Fullalove. 'Bicycles. Not even bicycles in China, if it was bicycles in China it might be interesting. But this weirdness. Lycra and helmets and tight-fitting stuff.'

He picked up a couple more street papers. A gay one. A music one.

'The free press,' said Fullalove. 'The revolution came to this.'

'What revolution was that?' asked Plant.

'The only one we knew,' said Fullalove.

'Ah, that one,' said Plant.

'You remember all that excitement. Enthusiasm. Commitment. Underground newspapers. How to roll a joint. How to plant a dope seed. How to make a Molotov cocktail. Sex acts described. Four-letter words. End censorship. End the war. And it comes to this. Sex and weirdness and deviance. One more strategy of control.'

'Wasn't it always that?' said Plant.

'It had a more satisfying superstructure,' said Fullalove. He brandished the bicycle cover around. 'I offered them politics and conspiracy and truth. And they choose bicycles.'

'You worked in alternative papers before?' Plant asked.

'This isn't alternative.'

'But it pretends to be, you said.'

'You perjure yourself to say it pretends to anything except making money. No way it's a real alternative.'

'Were there ever any real ones?'

'Probably not,' said Fullalove.

'Make-believe ones, then?'

'When?'

'Back in the seventies.'

'Oh then,' said Fullalove. 'That's centuries ago.'

Plant nodded. He couldn't deny it.

'Play school,' said Fullalove. 'Something for the rich kids to do before they got the top jobs. They had these imitation papers to fool around with till it was time to get a day job.'

'And they got real jobs?'

'Of course they did,' said Fullalove. 'Rich kids always do. Real salaries, anyway.'

'So some of the big journalists today worked on them when they were younger?'

'Big journalists? What big journalists?'

'People like Huxter and Angela Dark.'

'Big,' laughed Fullalove. 'Inflated by meat and alcohol and fluid retention.'

Plant waited.

'Those bastards. Yeah, they played around with some revolutionary alternative change-the-world, read-all-about it, we-are-your-chosen-people rag. Yeah.'

Plant nodded.

'Not something they care to be reminded of in my observation.'

Plant nodded some more. All unconcern. Transparent to Fullalove.

'You're working on something?' Fullalove asked.

'Trying to find a freak called Dorritt who did a survey of the alternative press twenty-five years ago.'

'Poor bastard. Who you working for?'

'Huxter,' said Plant.

'Huxter. And you were just asking about him. What a coincidence. And he didn't tell you about himself? Or not all about himself?'

Plant shrugged.

'Checking up on your employer, is that it?'

'It can be useful to know where you stand,' said Plant.

'On your knees if you're like the rest of us,' said Fullalove. 'Or flat on your back if you're Angela Dark. But it doesn't hurt to ask. Or does it?'

'You tell me,' said Plant.

'You might have to buy me lunch,' said Fullalove.

'No problem.'

'Seeing as you're on the expenses lunch circuit I assume. But also seeing the uncertainty of memory, the lapses as one steps so far into the recesses of time, a slow glissade back up the primrose path. A memory search needs feeding.'

'Sure,' said Plant. Anywhere but this desperate bar.

They drove across to Ashfield, parked the car and walked past the church hall and the food being doled out to the down and outs, past the Polish house, last relic of the post-war Slavic migration, down into the new Chinatown, into the Shanghai Night. In the early afternoon. Handmade noodles. Shallot cake. Vegetable dumplings. Chili pepper tofu.

'I don't know where they came from originally,' said Fullalove. 'Melbourne. Canberra. Adelaide. Somewhere else. They always come from somewhere else so when you look back on it you find you know nothing about them. Nothing about their background. Which means nothing about them. Who they are. What their connections are. Who pays the bills.

'They took a house in one of the inner city suburbs. More than one. They moved around a bit. They liked genteel environments. It was all alternative but some people rented slums and some people rented federation mansions. They rented federation mansions. Maybe they were rich kids. Obviously they were wired. They went for elegance. Nice old gardens. Lawns. The girls flaunting around bare-breasted. All very don't touch. A sadistic element, one has to speculate.

Nordic womanhood, very fetching. And diaphanous drapes. Lots of hangers on. And an inner circle. Some of the girls belonged to that, some didn't. The heavy men belonged to it with the heavy women. Diaphanous drapes notwithstanding, power knew power. Amidst the frangipanis, the wisteria, beneath the jacarandas, among the bottle brushes. You know. To me it all seemed very aesthetic. Made me want to reach for my Browning. I never could see the revolution there. I found it all very strange. Once in a while they got out this paper. *Rights of Man.* Then they got wise and called it *Rights of Women.* Then they called it *Right On.*'

'Did you ever contribute?' Plant asked.

'No.'

'Never?'

'Never. They weren't exactly welcoming. They had their own scene going, they didn't want any other writers. Unless they called them in. They wanted to be in that position, power, they could just call people in.'

'Screw any of them?

'I told you, they weren't very welcoming.'

'But you went round there.'

'I went round there. I went everywhere, in those days. They said it was an open house, but it wasn't. They called it a collective. How the old words come back. Clanking all their delicious old hypocritical baggage. Decisions about policy to be made by the collective of the people working on the paper. Sitting round a table and agreeing. Rolling joints, drinking tea.'

'Sounds relaxing,' said Plant.

He poured some more tea himself. He liked Chinese restaurants that provided free tea. Just topped it up for you when it ran out. In the old downtown Chinatown in those days, the days Fullalove was talking about, there were still restaurants where you took your pot or cup down to the urn at

the back and filled it up yourself. As and when you wanted. Or was that earlier? Was his sense of history going?

'It was a nonsense,' said Fullalove. 'You never get a paper out by a collective. There's always some power freak who's controlling it.'

'Sex slaves?' said Plant.

'Sex would have been part of the power trip.'

'So who was the power figure?'

'It's a long time ago. I was never close to them. My impression is there were changes. Internal struggles. Revolutions within the revolution. What a joke.'

Did he just not know the names? Plant wondered. It was unlike Fullalove to admit to not knowing something. Whether he was close to it or not, he made a point of knowing. And he was always capable of making it up if he didn't know.

'So you won't tell me.'

'It's not that I won't, comrade. The brain refuses. I can't remember if I ever knew.'

'Huxter? Angela Dark? Sperrit? They were part of it?'

'They could have been part of the collective. Everybody over there claimed to be part of the collective. There was some American freak, too. He was mixed up with it. Ollie something or other. He was supposed to be a draft resister. If you want to believe it. People came and went all the time. But there had to be a hard core holding it together.'

'Were they part of that?'

'Could have been. Not my scene. The paper wasn't around that long, anyway.'

'What happened to it?'

'What happens to everything?' said Fullalove. 'It died.'

'And the collective.'

'That died too. The way of all flesh.'

'Huxter? Angela Dark?'

'So?'

'They're still around.'

'Journalists,' said Fullalove. 'Same thing. Death by a thousand cuts.'

'So who would know any more about it?'

Fullalove looked put out. No one knew any more about anything than Fullalove. He looked put out and he looked at his empty bowl and empty cup. All in dumb show. His song without words. Plant offered to order more noodles, more tea.

'I need a beer. Or a Scotch might be better.'

'They're not licensed.'

'There are such things as pubs,' said Fullalove.

'All right,' said Plant. 'Let me settle the bill.'

Fullalove gave a relieved smile. At the promise of a drink. At someone settling the bill. 'You could try Bobbie,' he offered. Doubtfully. Reluctantly. 'She was around then. She's still in business. Of sorts. Unlike the rest of us.'

'Bobbie who?'

'Bobbie's Books.'

'Is that her name?'

'The name of her game.'

'And Dorritt?'

'Dorritt?'

'The character I'm looking for. Did a survey of the alternative.'

'Try Bobbie,' said Fullalove.

'Where would I find her?'

'Buy me a drink and I'll tell you.'

They went across the road into the Crocodile Farm Hotel because Fullalove liked the sound of it. Fullalove ordered a leg-opener because he liked the sound of it and a second and a third because he liked the taste. Plant had a light beer. They sat in the window and watched the cars and buses and container trucks judder down Liverpool Road. They watched the shoppers crowding the pavements. They watched beautiful

young Chinese and African girls walking past in school uniform. Fullalove sighed at the passing of the years as the afternoon headed towards nightfall.

Nine

There was something about warehouses, Plant reflected. Space. Utilitarianism. Impersonality. The impersonality more than anything. Or perhaps not impersonality. They had character, after all. It was the character that appealed to him. The lack of the domestic. No superfluous china ornaments. No vases of flowers. No stools to bark your shins against. No coffee tables to overturn. Just boxes. He could understand why people lived in warehouses. Even if they called them lofts. It was a fantasy he was not out of sympathy with.

He looked round at the metal shelves, stacked with paper, cardboard, books. The clatter of machinery was its own music. He could understand why peasant farmers liked to live in the barn with their livestock. It appealed to his fantasies of functionality. Bobbie of Bobbie's Books put down the phone and looked across at him. Blonded hair, gold necklace, earrings, bangles, beige business suit.

'You wanna look round?' she said. 'Or did you already?'

Once more he quailed before the power of power dressing, as he was meant to. He had not encountered so much feminine power for years. Not since he lay helpless and wriggling in the carrycot.

'Dorritt?' she said. 'Who could forget him? Amazing for someone you'd never think you could remember.'

The archetypicality of the insignificant. No wonder the secret service had recruited him. If they had. The magnificently unmemorable. Except it went wrong. He was so unnoticeable that people couldn't help noticing it, the unnoticeability, and remembering him.

'He weaseled his way in and it was like we had him for life. Ferreting around. Like a rat in the attic,' she said.

'Tell me,' said Plant.

She looked hard at him.

'I am doing,' she said.

Dorritt had come round one afternoon when they were packing books. And got in everyone's way. Sat on the boxes to be opened. Trod on the order forms laid out on the floor. It was before they could afford benches. Tripped over the piles of books they had counted out. Spilled his coffee.

His moustache palpitated with excitement. His hair hung lank and greasy.

'I thought he was a poet,' said Bobbie. 'One of those English ones. All dandruff and unwashed socks.'

'I'd like to talk to you,' he said.

'Talk,' said Bobbie, counting out another twenty-five copies of *How to Grow Your Own Dope and Harvest It.*

'Well, interview you,' said Dorritt.

'Go ahead,' said Bobbie.

He took out his notebook.

'What is the aim of your publishing programme?'

'To sell books,' said Bobbie.

He laughed. A madman's laugh. It wasn't that funny. It wasn't funny at all. It was the bottom line. Which they barely touched.

'Apart from that?'

'Apart from that we're going to be out of business.'

He snuffled some more.

'But your editorial objectives?'

'Not to publish poetry,' she said. Hoping that would get rid of him. But it didn't. He just wrote it down. Licking the point of his pen first. Like he should have been wearing bicycle clips.

There was no shaking him. He had that characterless determination of a mollusc. Just hanging in there and sucking in the seawater and pissing it out again through the same orifice and seeing what stuck.

'It was before we had a warehouse,' said Bobbie. 'When we kept the books in boxes under the bed. My bed. I think it gave him ideas. In fact I'm sure it gave him ideas. He started to dribble. I'd be making a coffee and he'd be standing right next to me, rubbing himself up against me. I suppose if you shut your eyes and thought of Club Med you could get off on it. But then when you opened them it was kind of distasteful.

'And he kept coming back. It seemed like every day.' She cracked her finger joints. 'It probably wasn't. It was probably just every other day. But it seemed like every day. Questions, questions. Who are your backers? Who are your editors? Who decides policy? I figured he just wanted another grope. You get used to old men feeling you up in this business. It's like the movies. Except it doesn't pay like the movies. But it's how you sell books.'

She sighed, reflectively.

'You never suspected anything?' said Plant.

'Like what? Like he was a dirty old man in training? Practising till he was old enough to buy himself a raincoat. Saving up to buy lollies for little girls?

'Not exactly,' said Plant.

'I was young and innocent,' said Bobbie. She flashed him an iridescent smile. 'In those days. Now I know better. Now I know everyone who sidles up to you has a book they want to publish. Want you to publish. It didn't take long, though. Like with Dorritt. I thought if he wasn't a poet he was just one of those loonies. Obsessives, you know. I thought he'd got bored with train-spotting. Been warned off the railroad. Now he was writing down lists of all the publishers he could find. I should have guessed.'

'Guessed what?'

'Guessed that he wanted me to publish it.'

'Publish what?'

'His list.'

'Did he?'

'Of course he did. Like I told you. Everyone has something they want you to publish.'

She gave him another hard look.

'Where's your manuscript?' she asked. 'Where've you hidden it? You gonna surprise me and pull it out of your pants at the last minute?'

'No,' said Plant.

'You sure?'

'Sure,' said Plant.

'You're not writing a book?'

'No.'

'Never?'

Plant shook his head.

'Cross your heart and wish to die. You never tried to write a book?'

Plant found himself shrivelling before her gaze.

'It was a long time ago,' he said.

'There you are,' she said.

'Nobody's perfect,' said Plant.

'It'll cost you,' she said. 'These days it's author pays. You gotta book, we'll publish it for you. Only this time round you pay.'

'It's OK,' said Plant.

'You bet it's OK,' said Bobbie.

'But Dorritt?' He brought her back to him.

'Yeah, well. In those days I hadn't thought it through. In those days we did it different.'

'So did you?'

'Did I what?'

'Publish Dorritt?'

'You gotta be joking. The man was a maniac. He'd gone mad pestering every small press in the business. And many out of it. Interviewing them. Can you imagine? Here we all are, stuffing books in packets, hustling the bookshops, typesetting till midnight, sending out invoices and trying to get paid, and this freak comes round bugging you with his questions. People would tell him anything just to get rid of him. You should've seen it.'

'Seen what?'

'His book, as he called it. It was a shambles. A disgusting disorganised mess. Who would ever want to publish that?'

She shook her head reflectively. A quarter of a century sped by on fast reverse. Dorritt shimmered before their eyes, licking his ballpoint, peering earnestly through his dandruffed spectacles, recording the cultural revolution.

'It would be different now, of course. Now there's money in data. Any sort of data. Now any sort of list is money. Now you do it electronically and charge the earth. The sky's the limit. But then. Publish it? How many was it going to sell? Fifty? Ninety-seven? Now we can do small runs. Small runs are our specialty. Remember that if you want to publish your book for all your friends. No job too small.'

'Thank you,' said Plant. 'What I meant was,' he explained, 'you didn't suspect he mightn't have been authentic?'

'Authentic? What's that when it's in town?'

'That there might have been some other reason for his list.'

'I never saw any reason,' she said, 'so why would I think there'd be another one? Unless it was the same lack of reason twice. Like a split personality. I can buy that. Is that what you mean?'

'No,' said Plant.

'So what do you mean?' she said. 'I gotta get back to work. You're as bad as Dorritt with your questions.'

'You never thought he might have been working for someone?'

'You gotta be kidding. Who would employ him?'

Plant shrugged.

'Come to that, who's employing you?'

'You never thought it could have been a security matter?'

She laughed.

'You trying to tell me you're some sort of spook?'

'No,' said Plant.

'What then?'

'That Dorritt might have been.'

'That Dorritt was? A spook? Now I've heard everything.'

Plant stood there silent. No one had ever heard everything.

'You telling me he was writing this down for the CIA or something?'

'Or something.'

'No,' she said, 'I certainly never thought that. I thought he was just another maniac sent to torment me. Just another poet who couldn't rhyme. Couldn't spell. Couldn't shave. Couldn't afford a toothbrush. Or a clothes brush.'

'He was doing magazines as well as small presses, wasn't he?' Plant said.

'Everything,' she said. 'Bus tickets too, probably. Anything unfit to print.'

'Alternative papers.'

'All one of them.'

'Was there only one?'

She gave him a hard look again. 'You really are like him,' she said. 'Questions, questions. You're sure you're not him in disguise? Had a face transplant?'

Plant shook his head.

'Is that a yes?' she asked.

'The alternative paper, what was it?'

'You know how long ago this was?' she said.

He tried immobility this time.

'I could've been a grandmother by now,' she said.

Impassivity.

'Nah,' she said. 'Who knows how many there were? Why don't you find Dorritt and ask him to show you his list. Betcha he keeps it under his pillow still.'

'*Rights of Man?*'

'Yeah, *Rights Of Man, Rights Of Women, Right The Wrongs, Human Rights.* They kept changing its name. To avoid prosecution. A great way to run a magazine. Build up a readership. Brand loyalty. *Last Rites, Women's Rites.*'

'*Rites* with a g and an h or *writes* with a w?'

'We are being scholarly,' she said. 'You absolutely sure you're not Dorritt? Son of Dorritt? Grandson?'

He gave another headshake.

'Dorritt meets the Wolfman?'

'No,' he said.

'Ah well, rites as in rites. You know.'

'No,' he said.

'As in weird stuff,' she said. 'Don't tell me you don't know that. Full moon stuff. Sex and torture. Snuff movies.'

'Really?'

'Gotcha excited,' she said. 'Nah, I don't know. They spelled it every darn way. Kept changing it around.'

'Where was their office?"

'Same thing. It kept moving. They started in Melbourne or some place. Then they were in Sydney. Then they went up the coast. Then it stopped appearing. Like everything else. Except Dorritt. No, I tell a lie. He stopped appearing in the end. What a relief.'

'Where did they go up the coast?'

'Hippyville,' she said, 'where else? Byron Bay. Nimbin. Mushroom country.'

'And Dorritt went with them?'

'Did I say that?'

'I was asking.'

'He went most places so he could've.'

'Who was running it?'

'Who was running what?'

'*Rights* or whatever they called it.'

'Maniacs,' she said.

'You don't remember who?'

She yawned.

'You met one maniac you've met the lot. I gotta enough to do remembering what I'm doing now.'

'Angela Dark? Huxter?'

'Could be.'

'Doesn't ring a bell?'

'Everything rings a bell,' she said, 'and no one answers. These were the good times. People just got stoned and got laid and got wiped out. There was too much happening to remember any of it. If you can remember it you weren't there. People didn't go around writing it all down. Except Dorritt. Why don't you ask him?'

'I'm trying to find him, I don't know where he is,' said Plant.

'That figures.'

'But there must have been people writing for *Rites*.'

'You tell me.'

'Articles. Stories. Somebody must have been writing things.'

'Why?'

'To have something to print.'

She sniffed.

'They probably just copied everything. Lifted it from overseas.'

'You reckon?'

'Never have too low an opinion of writers,' she said.

'I'll try and remember.'

'You don't need to try,' she said. 'Just meet some.'

'So it was all stolen?'

'Stolen?' she said. 'No. Just lifted. They just printed it. Public domain. Copyright was a bourgeois concept. Like now. Just take it off the web. They pioneered the greed of multinational media. Showed them how to do it. I wouldn't be surprised if the multinationals weren't behind it all. How to steal your moral rights. How to infringe copyright.'

'So they never called it *Property Rights*.'

'Not that I recall. Listen, if you're so interested why don't you buy yourself a copy and read it. It's always the same. People want to waste your time talking about books and magazines but they never want to buy them.'

'Like you said,' said Plant, 'it was a long time ago. Where would you buy them now?'

'Mac's,' she said. 'Where else? He's got rooms full of the stuff. Every abandoned word you'd never want to know about. The original mine of forgotten works.'

Ten

Mac Arber's was the obvious place. He should have known. He did know. It was just that he had repressed it. How much you must know if you didn't repress half of it. Or more. If the subconscious was an iceberg, how much unwelcome knowledge there must be beneath the surface. Like Mac's shop. Full of unwanted memories, the denied past, the caverns of all too certainly was, rather than the misty heights of Mount Might Have Been.

The little bell tinkled as Plant pushed open the door.

He hated it. The coy suggestion of yesteryear. The corner shops that are no more. The ornate gold-filigreed cash register with little signs that popped up. No Sale. And behind it the glistening teeth and gold framed glasses and green sweater of Mac himself. All official Australiana colours of the horrible Hawke years.

Plant's days for second-hand books had passed. Those years of dust in the nose, grime on the fingers, dust and grime on trouser knees from grovelling along the bottom shelves. Looking for bargains. Maybe even dust and grime on bare knees, it was so long ago. Biggles. *Just William*. Now he was allergic to it all. The dust, the grime, the books, the memories. He could feel himself wanting to sneeze and unable to, the surge and the cessation, the irritation hanging there, suspended, pinned in the nostrils. And Mac's ingratiating Australiana greeting.

'G'day, cobber.'

Plant could neither speak nor sneeze.

'Cat get your tongue, did it?' said Mac.

And accompanying it all Percy Grainger thumping away on a piano roll. Second-hand bookseller to the carriage trade.

Mac led him out the back. Down corridors of books. Into a room with Curiosa & Curiosa in gold lettering over the door. Inside were metal cabinets, flat sliding trays for maps and prints. Mac slid one open. Rare issues of *Playboy* and *Sire* and *Spick and Span* in plastic covers.

'We don't really stock newspapers,' said Mac. 'Except for front page disaster stories. The Titanic. Princess Di. The Whitlam sacking. If you think that was a disaster, that is.'

'It was an alternative paper,' said Plant.

'I know, I know,' said Mac. 'But it's still newsprint. It decays. Dust to dust. Ashes to ashes. Very hard to preserve. All those poor trees.'

Plant nodded.

'Of course that makes them especially valuable if they are preserved. Pricey if not priceless.'

'I'll bet,' said Plant.

'You'd be surprised how pricey,' said Mac.

'No I wouldn't,' said Plant.

But he was.

Anyway, it was all on expenses. Necessary research materials.

And it was worth it.

The title ran across the front page. *LAST RITES*. In heavy black letter. But it wasn't the title Plant fixed on.

The cover art was photographic. Colour. Not especially good colour. This had been the alternative. The underground. Bad registration. Smudgy. But it wasn't the print quality that he was looking at. Not the technology of it. Or aesthetics. Or whatever.

It was an array of naked bodies. Arranged like an office photograph. Some standing, men at the back. Some reclining. Female persons at the front. BACK TO NATURE it said, beneath the masthead. BIRDS IN THE BUSH along the bottom. And between the captions an array of breasts and torsos, bushes and balls.

'Would you like the private viewing room?' asked Mac in his campiest cockney. 'The couch is ever so comfy. And there's a washbasin and towel.'

Planted directed his gaze to the smiling faces. It could've been Huxter. Hard to be sure with hair. And Angela Dark. The same bold gaze. Almost certainly her from what he'd seen. And a headless man cupping a breast. Not the man's own. The girl with the cupped breast he didn't recognise. Nor the man with the obscured head cupping it. But the other girl. Was it Bobbie? Wouldn't she have said? Didn't she remember?

'I'll take it,' said Plant.

'A good idea,' said Mac. 'I always feel it's better to get off on these things in the privacy of one's own home.'

He spent the evening gazing at the cover.

Was this what they were worried about? With Sperrit's politician espousing family values, Angela Dark's column denouncing pornography, Huxter's arts pages in all their servile vacuity, was this something they would prefer should remain forgotten? He wondered. It could be.

He went into the kitchen and made himself a coffee. Not the ideal nightcap. He went back into the bedroom and lay on the bed and rolled himself a joint to counteract the effects of the caffeine. He picked up *Last Rites* again.

Was this what it had come to, spending his solitary nights gazing at nudes from long ago on fading newsprint?

It seemed so.

Eleven

Plant drove north, out on the freeway towards Newcastle and, after the freeway ended, up the Pacific Highway. That year he was driving his bottom of the line Hyundai. Like the year before. And the year before that. And the foreseeable future. He read the signs with that sign-reading compulsion of the print-preoccupied. Australian Reptile Park. Banana Coast Credit Union. Sudden Comfort Motel. Double Crossing Creek. Safety Beach. Blackadder Road. And the sights. He looked out for the sights. The roadhouse in the shape of Ayer's Rock. The Big Banana. The Sikh temple. The Big Prawn. He was saddened to see that Geriatric Tractor Spares was no longer trading. After a certain point there was a lot of country music on the radio.

And the stretches of bush, pasture, rivers. He was not one who found the Australian bush boring. He registered the variations as sometimes he was more inland, sometimes more coastal. Egrets. Pelicans. Flowering gums. Palm trees. Sugar cane. The change in the country as he reached the great river plains. The smell from the sugar refineries sour on the air. Yet sweet.

He passed the signs to vineyards impassively. They offered pathetically short detours, but he was untempted. This was the Pacific Highway. The road to the state's dope-growing source. One of the sources. One of the many. That didn't take away the point. There might be many roads to kif. But this was certainly one of them.

He checked in at a beach resort with individual cabins because he liked the idea of a cabin to himself. No one the other side of the wall. No one above. No one below. Just the goannas sunning themselves and scurrying back beneath the

raised floor. Currawongs trampling up and down the roof. Reptiles were all right. Birds were all right. It was just people he didn't want too close.

First thing in the morning he made a call from a phone box and got off the line quickly. Then he drove into Byron and sat at a beach cafe and took a leisurely breakfast of pancakes and maple syrup and coffee. All the condiments were here. All that was missing was the dope. He couldn't call in before breakfast. It would look too desperate. In terms of dope. Too purposeful in terms of having a yarn.

Out at sea the surfers surfed. Where were the sharks? Plant preferred to know where the sharks were. Even if there were only one or two.

He watched a bandicoot run out of the grass and bite one of the breakfasters. The breakfaster let out a yowl and the bandicoot disappeared.

Nature. It was coming back to him. Most comical. He hoped the bandicoot wasn't rabid. Or tubercular. He'd read somewhere that English badgers were tubercular and were cross-infecting cattle. Another good reason to be vegetarian. Along with Mad Cow Disease. He had stopped eating imported English Stilton. Regretfully. Anyway, it had a high fat content. He suspected the pancakes with maple sugar and cream did too. No doubt about the cream. But as far as he knew there were not that many badgers running around in Australia. And no one had admitted to Mad Cow Disease.

Max had been there for years. One of the first fleet. Of the hippy, alternative, dope-smoking, lifestyle invasion that descended on a region of surf beaches and small farms, dairy, sugar cane, avocados, macadamia nuts. The plantations ran up and down the hills like quilting. They shimmered like a psilocybin vision. The whole natural world, even the unnatural agricultural world, took on this numinous quality. Everything immanent. Vibrating.

Max was married and had kids and his wife worked and sometimes he worked and sometimes he looked after the house and land and sometimes he just gazed at the unlit wood-burning stove and did nothing. Smoking apart. He'd said on the phone he'd got nothing to drink so if Plant wanted something he should bring something. Plant didn't. Not drink. But he stopped at a bottle shop and bought wine anyway. A rough red from the Riverina. Another great dope-growing region. $5.95 on special.

Plant hadn't been up north for years. Too many years. More years than he cared to count. It had changed, yes. But after a while he realised it hadn't changed that much. There were developments on the coast. Brick and tile. Manicured miniature blocks. De facto retirement settlements. There was no work, what else was there to do but retire? It was a good place to retire to. Why shouldn't people have a good retirement environment?

Inland not much had happened. Not obviously. Farms had been broken up. Houses built. But tucked away. Five-acre blocks. Twenty-five-acre blocks. Hundred-acre blocks. People came up here to be tucked away.

Plant drove inland. Nimbin direction. He drove for miles. Roads that wound back on themselves. Dirt roads. Hairpin bends with convex mirrors that supposedly let you see who was coming from somewhere else. Occasional roadside stalls offering some single product: avocados or peaches or macadamia nuts. No one attending them, payment on the honour system, put a dollar in the tin can. Plant reflected on honor. He bought two dollars worth of macadamia nuts and then realised he had nothing with which to crack them open.

He followed Max's directions over single-lane bridges, across causeways with posts marking floodwater levels. Max's house sat splendidly in a paddock of black scorched earth, grass tussocks burned and blackened, not a green blade in

sight. He pulled into a rutted driveway and Max sauntered out to meet him.

'Long time,' said Max.

'Seems like I was lucky to find you,' said Plant, gesturing at the ashen wasteland.

'One more gust of wind and you might have missed me forever,' said Max. 'Burning off. Bushfire precautions, you know. Then the wind changed. Like it always does.'

'Saved the house,' said Plant, as they went in.

'You noticed,' said Max. 'It was close. I nearly let it go. But I wasn't sure about the insurance policy. Acts of wanton idiocy. Pity really. It would've been a good opportunity. Rebuild and all that.'

There was a bowl of fruit and a bowl of dope on the table.

'You want tea? Coffee?'

'Just a smoke would suit me,' said Plant, handing over the wine.

'Go for it.'

He went for it.

Then he relaxed and took in his surroundings.

'It's very black out there.'

'Isn't it? Thought you'd like it. Actually, I rather like it myself. Could be next year's landscaping fashion. Retro. Scorched earth. Vietnam. The Gulf. Iraq. Afghanistan. Pakistan. Might appeal to the left.'

'There isn't any,' said Plant.

'Is that so? The news from the metropolis. No left left.'

'No.'

'Well, it might appeal to the right. Might appeal to them even more.'

He rolled a joint, lit it, and tossed the match over the deck.

'It's practical,' Max expounded. 'No worries about starting an inadvertent bush fire. Not another one. Great for smokers. I can see the appeal. Just need the finance to market the concept.'

They sat at an old, paint-stripped pine wood table on the deck at the side of the house. Out of the wind. Or maybe it was the front of the house, side on to the road. It was one of those wooden farm cottages that might have had bits added on and it was hard to tell what was front, what was side. Max opened the wine.

'Roll another if you want,' he said.

Plant did.

'The last remnants of local agriculture,' said Max. 'And they're stamping it out. Great helicopter searches. SWAT teams. Back to Vietnam here at the end of the growing season. So people get busted. They put them out of business. It's like the coca elimination programs in South America. Or poppies in Afghanistan. Except we don't have any guerillas to fight for our rights. It's ridiculous. It was the one thing people could make a bit of money on. Growing. The dairy industry's destroyed since they deregulated. Sugar, not exactly a world shortage. Now we've cut out the subsidies and removed tariffs, anyone else can grow it cheaper and dump it here. And there's only so many avocados and macadamia nuts you can eat. Everyone planted them. Everywhere. So now the crop price is right down. Grass was the only thing that gave a consistent return. The local farmers got the idea. And now they bust everybody. They're even busting back-packers on the streets of Byron. For possession. Can you imagine? Really encourages the tourist trade. So it's a lot of rural poverty. Dysfunctional families. Unemployment. The below-the-poverty-line employed – contract work, part-time work. That's the way it's going. That's the way it's gone.'

Plant nodded sympathetically. He rolled another smoke while it was still attainable.

'The end of the dream. Some dream. Nobody thought it was going to be that easy. But nobody thought it was going to be this ridiculous.'

I think I did, thought Plant. But he said nothing.

'It's worse in Thailand and the Philippines,' said Max. 'If that cheers you up. But it's the same thing. No work on the land. Some of the local tradesmen tried working on jobs in Sydney. Big projects. But by the time they'd paid accommodation and got pissed every night they weren't ahead.'

He poured another glass.

'Guest workers in their own country,' he said. 'It's the kids it's rough on. No money. Broken families. No work. No hope.'

'What do they do?'

'Disappear. Who knows? Drift to the cities and become prostitutes or police. Join the army. Go to jail. It's a pretty limited choice. Like Thailand and the Philippines.'

Twelve

'What about those communications whiz-kids who moved up here?' Plant asked.

'Who were they?' said Max.

His voice had the flat, toneless scepticism of the country.

'Alternative media moguls.'

'Not seen hair nor hide of the beast,' said Max.

'But weren't there people who came up here? Writers. Film people. Journalists.'

'There's probably some around,' said Max. 'The average writer earns five thousand dollars a year. Eight-five per cent of your average actors are unemployed. Or is it ninety-five per cent? They're hardly contributing much to the gross local product.'

'You paint a gloomy picture,' said Plant.

'I know it's what you like to hear,' said Max.

'No,' said Plant. 'I want exhilaration. The good times. When people believed there was a whole new world out there.'

'It's just round the corner beyond the third paddock on the left,' said Max. 'You can't miss it.'

'Wasn't there an alternative paper here? Full of hopes.'

'Decentralisation funding?' asked Max. 'Regional development assistance?'

'Is there such?'

'There are always subsidies around and they always go to the rich and well-connected who know how to milk them.'

'Not to dairy farmers.'

'Dairy farmers lost their subsidies.'

'Name of Charles Dorritt mean anything to you?' Plant asked.

'No.'

'Angela Dark? Huxter? Sperrit?'

'Now I see where we're going,' said Max. 'I thought this was just an old friends reminisce number.'

'Absolutely.'

'But now I see it's an investigation.'

'No conflict of interest,' said Plant.

Some people might have denied there was any investigation. Or tried harder to conceal it. But Plant found people were more responsive to the idea of an investigation than not. Idle chatter was never that focused. But when people knew there was a purpose, a case, a suspect, then they told you a lot. If you were lucky.

'Someone told me they were all mixed up with some alternative newspaper that moved up here. Back in the seventies.'

'The seventies,' said Max. 'When was that?'

'Isn't it still the seventies?' Plant said. 'Up here?'

'You want to believe it, believe it.'

'I want to believe it,' said Plant.

'Then roll yourself another one.'

He pushed the bowl of dope across the table. Plant picked up the papers and began rolling some more.

'It was a long time ago,' Max said. He ran his tongue along the back of his teeth reflectively. 'Newspaper. Never much news but I suppose you might have called it that.'

'What was it, then?'

'To me it was a circus.'

'A circus. Like in jugglers, clowns, elephants?'

'No elephants.'

'But the rest? Literally?'

'Literally, symbolically, metaphorically.'

'People swallowing fire and jumping through hoops?'

'And juggling balls and wearing face-paint and acting like clowns. They had a farm. People came and went. Up from the

big city and back again. They did a magazine. Once in a while. Mainly I would have said they were into having a scene.'

'Having a scene.'

'Whatever was trendy for any given ten minutes.'

'Where did they stand?' asked Plant.

'Stand? I don't think they stood anywhere. They were all about having the grooviest scene outside of Haight Ashbury or wherever they'd happened to have heard of. They had a lot of competition, of course. There were poor little rich kids playing at the pastoral life everywhere you turned.'

'And the paper?'

'It seemed to me the paper was more an excuse to have a scene going than anything else. Sort of attract people into their orbit.'

'I believe that's how newspaper proprietors generally see it,' said Plant.

Plant went out to the car and brought back his copy of *Last Rites*.

'Do you remember any of them?'

Max looked at the cover and chuckled.

'I recognise Rose,' he said.

He pointed to one of the naked girls.

'She came out of the shower one time and padded round the house. "Don't you think I have just about the most perfect body?" she said. Unforgettable. I mean, what do you say?'

Plant could offer no suggestions.

'Yes, that's her. I studied her intently. Trying to think of the right thing to say. You know, something specific. To show I meant it. Not just generalized stuff. Yes, that's certainly Rose. She's been around for years. And when I say around I mean around. Even abducted by aliens at one point, I seem to remember her saying. Popular girl, our Rose.'

'She's still around?'

'Yes.'

'I wouldn't mind seeing her,' said Plant.

'I'm sure it could be arranged. How much do you want to see?'

'I'd like to talk to her.'

'Ask a few questions.'

'Something like that.'

The wine glowed in the noon light. The bowl of fruit vibrated in the marijuana haze. Cinders blew around the paddock as the willy-willys played across it.

'You want me to give her a call?' said Max. 'Say you'll drop over?'

'Would you?'

'I can give it a try.'

'Where's she live?' Plant asked.

'Up towards Mount Warning.'

'Mount Warning?'

'Don't say you weren't told,' said Max. 'A volcanic core.'

Max made the call and Plant rolled another one for the road.

'All those small farmers who've been driven out of business,' said Plant when Max came back out. 'Are none of them left any more?'

'You need something?'

'Could,' said Plant.

'Dairy farmers?' said Max. 'You want to buy some butter?'

'Bad for the cholesterol levels,' said Plant. 'How about dope farmers?'

'You want the expensive stuff or the ordinary stuff? That's ordinary grade we're smoking. Working ganja. The expensive stuff's good if you want to sit around like a zombie. But if you've got things to do….'

'I've got a few things to do,' said Plant. 'But I quite like sitting around.'

'One of each?' said Max.
'Sounds right,' said Plant.

He drove back from Max's content. A smile of content. A supply in reserve. Relaxed. Country roads. Little timber farmhouses. Grazing cattle. A white bird beside each cow looking for worms or insects disturbed by the cattle chewing into tussocks. Sometimes perched on the cow's back. Egrets. Most comical. *Je ne regrette rien.*

And then the comedy faded and the horror began as traffic banked up behind him, manic country drivers wanting to hurtle down the lanes at a hundred kilometers an hour. Plant pushed his speed up to seventy. Eighty. It felt fast. Too fast. He didn't know the roads. They were narrow. Winding. Blind corners. Double lines. No overtaking. The line of cars behind him built up. He looked for somewhere to pull over, but he drove for an age before finding a spot, one he could see in time, one he could pull into safely at the speed they were forcing him to drive. It was only a momentary relief. The line of cars went by, he pulled back onto the road, and as soon as he looked in his mirror there were more banked up behind him. It was a nightmare. He pulled over again and rolled a number while he was at it. And smoked it. It took an eternity to get back to the beach resort.

When he got to his cabin he ran a long shower to calm himself down. Then he sat out on the deck in his towels and rolled up a number of the zombie grade and took out his copy of *Last Rites* and studied it some more. He committed it to memory to make sure he would recognise Rose.

Thirteen

Plant made a mid-morning start, a couple of smokes or so and a couple of cups of tea on the little wooden deck, and then back on the Pacific Highway heading north, past Brunswick Heads, on past Ocean Shores, past Billinudgel, once touted as the federal capital, then off the new highway and onto the old, renamed Tweed Valley Way. Tweed, Valley of Contrasts, a sign alerted him. It was probably good to be told. Another sign proclaimed Weed Heads, the T wiped out. Sounded good to Plant. There were banana plantations on the hills, sugar cane on the flats. Eventually he left the old highway, turned down one of the country roads with its one-lane bridges and trickling creeks, flood markers for when the creeks became swollen, fast, and strong enough to sweep a car off the causeway. There were coral trees along the roadside, stands of conifers with fir cones strewn across the road, cattle grazing in the pasture, calves suckling. Mount Warning loomed on the horizon, its peak bent over in admonition, shrouded in dark, foreboding cloud.

Rose was sitting astride her sit-astride motor mower. And was she astride it. Like Boadicea, queen of the Celts, an Amazon breast exposed to air, light, sun, view, exposed to view, that was surely the point, Plant concluded. She wore ear mufflers. Or were they headphones, playing the swarming of the Valkyrie or something? Frank Zappa or Nick Cave.

She killed the motor, took off her goggles and earmuff earphones, and buttoned up her shirt.

'I don't suppose you minded,' she said.

'I like the natural look,' said Plant.

'Tough titty,' she said.

Nipples pressing against the shirt fabric. Hardened. Legs astride the tough little motor mower.

'My mobile vibrator,' she smiled. 'My little mechanical horsey,' she said, patting some cooler part of its anatomy and dismounting.

'I don't believe we've met,' she said, with the patrician confidence of the landowner.

'Plant,' he said. 'Max called you.'

'Plant,' she repeated. 'How nice. How natural.'

He suffered it.

'Rose,' she offered in exchange. 'Like you, a child of nature. At least in name.'

She walked towards the house, a large, turn of the century farmhouse, surrounded on each side by verandahs, shaded by strategically planted trees, mangoes, orange, lemon.

'I love this humid weather,' she said. 'Sweat running all down you. Like you've just been fucking. And it never stops.'

He followed her up the steps onto the wide spreading verandah. A hammock hung down one end. A couple of couches, with floral-patterned cushions, were lined up against the walls of the house. It spoke comfort, and the comfort of funds to maintain it.

'Ever you get a place with grass to cut, think of me,' she said.

'I will.'

'I'll mow it for you.'

'It's hard work,' he said.

'That's all right. I'm a big girl. I don't mind getting hot and sweaty.'

'So I see,' he said.

'You've seen nothing yet. For an extra fee you can put a chair in the bathroom and watch me while I take a shower.'

'How much to soap you?'

'Hard to say. By negotiation. I might end up letting you do it for free. But that wouldn't satisfy either of us, I imagine.'

'Oh, I don't know.'

'I do. Cash transactions only. Boots Apart we're called. Naked apart from boots. Sans culottes, avec sabots. I'll give you our card. Lawns mowed. By private arrangement what else gets done.'

'I don't actually believe you,' said Plant.

'But you'd like to, wouldn't you? It's the way of the times. You don't feel you've had sex unless you've paid for it. You don't feel you've settled the deal till you've had sex. Real-estate agents. Movie producers. Plumbers. Milkmen. University lecturers. It becomes as much a part of the job as the rest of the job. You know.'

'I don't know.'

'Well, you learn something every day. Air hostesses. Waitresses. Ski instructors.'

'I see.'

She picked up an avocado from a basket on the deck. Put it down, tried another, squeezing it gently, ever so gently.

'Impossible to tell when they'll be ripe. One day they're hard and unripe. One day they're ripe. And no signs. They're like relationships. They demand a touchy-feely emotional contact. Just feel me, see if I'm ripe, ow, don't pinch, you'll leave a bruise, careful, don't paw. You buy six avocados for a dollar at a roadside stall and your whole week is spent touching them up to see when they're ripe. And you're on your own to get away from relationships and you're back in a relationship again – with a fruit. Are they a fruit? A vegetable. I know,' she announced triumphantly, 'a plant.'

Plant gave his wan smile.

'Do you mind if I take a shower before we talk?'

Plant didn't mind.

She reappeared naked, a glistening blue and golden dragonfly on her hand. It was like one of those paintings in the collection of Rudolph II. The dragonfly rendered in extraordinarily exact etymological detail, as was everything else. He wasn't sure whether he would have recognised her or not. A fair bit chubbier. Time's ravages. Anyway, he knew what she looked like now.

'I found this poor little thing in the shower recess,' she said. 'So I liberated it.'

She flung her hands wide and it flew off.

'Liberation now,' she said.

'Go for it,' said Plant.

She re-emerged wearing jeans and a country-style checked shirt, like the squatter's daughter she probably was. Diana Krall played in the background.

'I wanted to ask you about the *Rights of Man*,' said Plant.

'Men are born free but are everywhere in chains.'

'Well, yes.'

'Is there any doubt?' she asked.

'The old underground paper,' he said, 'not the concept.'

'The concept is basic,' she said. 'The paper was to illustrate the concept. Without the concept there would never have been a paper.'

'It sounds very high minded,' he said.

'High minded?' she said. 'What is high minded about the rights of man? Or are you one of these modern thinkers.'

'I'm not a thinker,' said Plant.

'Clearly.'

'Huxter was a sweetie,' she said. 'You would have hated him. He was all for the rights of man. Not so sure about women. But he loved us. In his patriarchal way. He was one of those withdrawn, cold, fishy types. Fastidious. Sensitive.'

'Sensitive?' said Plant. Going for the monotone, suppressing his scepticism.

'It's the image, darling. You don't have to believe it. Even if they expect you to.'

'I see.'

'Whereas you,' she said, 'I see as more of the cold, insensitive type.'

'And the paper was his idea?'

'I don't know about that.'

'OK.'

'No, I mean I doubt it. I never thought of him as an innovator. He was bright. No doubt about that. But I don't know that he ever came up with new ideas. He was more the executive, you know. The executive in embryo, perhaps. Up the top there, but always taking orders.'

'Really,' said Plant.

'Well, some people,' she said, 'they act like born leaders, but they're not. They're born ruling class. We were all ruling class. But some never show the freedom of the imagination of the originator. They're never spontaneous. They're on a set of rails and they go down them. But somebody else controls the points.'

'And who was that?'

'We're talking in general terms here,' she said.

'You may be,' said Plant, 'but I'm not.'

'Ooh,' she said, 'the tough interrogator.'

'So who gave Huxter his orders?'

'Orders?' she said. 'Who said anything about orders?'

'Well, who made the decisions on the paper?'

'It was a collective.'

'Naturally. But who was behind it?'

'I knew it,' she said. 'I knew it. You're one of them.

'One of what?'

'An unreconstructed conspiracy theorist.'

'No, I'm not,' said Plant.

'Well, you would say that, wouldn't you?'

'I'm just trying to get some idea of how the paper ran.'

'Erratically,' she said. 'Spasmodically. What else do you expect from a collective?'

'I thought you believed in collectives.'

'Whatever gave you that idea?' she asked. 'And what makes you think I don't?'

He moved his hand. One of those expressive gestures for when words failed.

'Or is erratic a bad word in your dictionary?'

'Not at all,' he said. 'But Huxter. You wouldn't say he was erratic.'

'I wouldn't.'

'And he didn't mind it running erratically?'

'Like I said, he was good middle management. If it was going to be erratic, then he'd run it erratic. Erratically.'

'So it didn't come out regularly?'

'How could it be alternative and come out regularly? Or were you thinking underground meant like the trains running on time?'

'I hadn't thought of that,' said Plant. 'So you're saying it had to be erratic, otherwise it wouldn't have had credibility as an underground paper?'

'Well,' she said, 'what do you think?'

'So who made that decision?'

'Which decision?'

'That it had to come out irregularly?'

'You are a bit like Huxter,' she said. 'An embryonic control freak.'

He gave another hand gesture.

'Things naturally are irregular,' she said. 'That's the way things naturally happen. No one has to make decisions about that.'

'No one *has* to,' he agreed.

'You're working for Huxter?' she said. 'I don't believe you. Why would Huxter send you to ask about what he already knows? Unless he's developed Alzheimer's. Has he? Anyway if he has he wouldn't know where to send you or what to ask, would he? Has he?'

'Has he what?'

'Got Alzheimer's.'

'Not that I know of.'

'So why would he want to know about what he already knows? When he was here?'

'He was here all the time?'

'All what time?'

'When you were getting the paper out.'

'Getting the paper out didn't take that much time. You've seen it, haven't you? We only ever did the one paper here, anyway. Then it all fucked up.'

'What fucked up?'

'Things fucked up.'

'What things?'

'Every fucking thing. There were more and more arguments. Whether to keep it going. Whether it was achieving anything. Whether what the revolution needed was direct action.'

'What, a store of grenades and small arms in the barn?'

'That sort of thing.'

'Is that the way it went?'

'You'd have to ask the boys. That was their fantasy, not mine. Make love not war was mine.'

'Fantasy?'

'Fantasy, practice, what's the difference?'

Fourteen

'So,' said Rose. 'Have you come to talk about *Rights* or Huxter? Or are you just pleased to see me?'

'Actually, it's Charles Dorritt I came to talk about.'

'Yes?' she said. Blankly. Like a question.

'You know him?'

'Some kind of novelist?'

Plant said nothing.

'Not a novelist?'

'Not a novelist,' said Plant. 'Though he's writing his story now.'

'What sort of story?'

'He alleges recruitment by the secret service, kidnapping, torture, drugs and sex slavery.'

'Some story.'

'You don't remember him?'

'Should I?'

'He was compiling a catalogue of the alternative press.'

'Oh, that Charles Dorritt.'

'Yes, that one.'

'Little Charley,' she said. 'Do you see the snake?'

Slowly, head swaying from side to side, a carpet snake made its way up the steps to the verandah. All twelve foot of it.

'They're harmless,' said Rose. 'Except to rodents. You're not a rodent, are you?'

It reached the verandah rail and wrapped itself round the post, knotting its tail against the wood and raising itself upwards, up the post and onto the rail, and then up on higher, towards the verandah roof, gripping onto the post with its tail, climbing stage by stage, slowly, remorselessly, irrevocably.

'I found ten snake skins in the roof,' said Rose. 'They shed them.'

'Charles Dorritt,' said Plant.

'He was a sweetie,' Rose said.

'You do remember him.'

'Now you say who he was, I do,' she said.

'What do you remember?'

'Like you say, he was compiling a catalogue of the alternative press.'

'And he came up here?'

'Lots of people came up here in those days.'

'And Dorritt?'

'Yes, he came up here asking all these questions. I thought he was harmless.'

The snake pulled its final length onto the beam supporting the verandah roof. It lay there, contented, exhausted, lying in wait. Who knew?

'You thought he was harmless.'

'I did, yes. But Huxter and the others, they were suspicious.'

'Suspicious?'

'They thought he was some sort of, I don't know, infiltrator or something.'

'Infiltrator?'

'Informer, then.'

'Informing who?'

'Who knows? Drug squad. Secret service. Spooks incorporated. It could have been anybody.'

'So?'

'So, kidnapping, torture, drugs and sex-slavery, I guess. If that's how he saw it.'

'You're telling me you kidnapped him?'

'It was fashionable at the time,' she said.

'Fashionable?'

'The Red Brigades and the Tupamaros and the Baader-Meinhof and Patty Hearst. Even the media families were into it. Everybody was doing it. And writing about it. Novels. Movies. It was like a sort of theme of the times.'

'So you had to have your bit of it?'

'It was more like there was no choice. We were there and it took us on.'

'The theme?'

'Yes.'

'Puppets of the grand design.'

'Absolutely.'

'And torture? '

'That's a more recent thing. Abu Ghraib, Bagram, Guantanamo. I guess we must have been in advance of our time a bit.'

'You tortured him?'

'I wouldn't say we tortured him,' she said. 'But I suppose it might look like that.'

'I can't believe it.'

'I'm sure you can if you try.'

'What happened?'

'We got a bit carried away, I suppose.'

'You used drugs on him?'

'You want some?'

She got up and went out of the room.

Plant kept an eye on the carpet snake. The carpet snake kept a large beady eye on Plant.

Rose came back in with an old, floral biscuit tin, a packet of rolling papers and a lighter. She rolled a joint from the dope in the tin and lit up. She took three or four drags before passing it across to Plant.

'Keep it,' she said, rolling another.

Her hands were steady, her fingers didn't shake.

'And the sex slavery?'

'Do I look like the sort of person who would keep a sex slave?'

Plant said nothing.

'Why would I need to? Those were the good old days. Everybody was doing it. Who needed a slave? He might have been a sweetie but he wasn't that compelling.'

'So what exactly happened?'

'That's about it.'

'How long did this go on for?'

She shrugged.

'I'm not sure the long-term memory can cope with that one,' she said. She tapped the biscuit tin. 'Too many years of this to remember much at all.'

'That's convenient,' said Plant.

'Isn't it,' Rose agreed.

'You must remember something else.'

'If I do I'll let you know,' she said, lighting up again. 'But I doubt that I will.'

She blew a stream of smoke out through her nostrils.

'Nice stuff, isn't it?'

Plant agreed.

'In India they say to get a really good stone you kill a snake and bury it beneath the plant.'

The carpet snake looked down unblinkingly. It had the cold eyes of someone who would never forget.

'Better than killing a plant and burying it beneath the snake,' she said.

Or did she say Plant? Plant wondered.

She passed the joint across.

'Paradise,' she said.

'I thought Dorritt might have come up here,' Plant said.

'He did. I told you.'

'No, now,' said Plant. 'I'm trying to find him.'

'He hasn't been kidnapped again, has he?' said Rose.

‘I don’t know,’ said Plant.

‘I’m sure I don’t,’ she said.

They fixed each other with cold, unflinching stares. Plant, Rose and the snake.

Mount Warning peered down at them through its wreath of cloud.

Fifteen

Plant went into the Earth 'n' Sea Amazing Pizza and Pasta Family Restaurant as soon as it opened at five-thirty. Famous throughout the Universe. He sat at a table at the back and ordered a Mullumbimby Madness vegetarian pizza and a house red. A bottle of. He could have ordered it by the glass, but over the years he had found that by the time you'd had the number of glasses you needed, it was cheaper to buy it by the bottle.

He wasn't the only solitary male. A couple of young single parents minded a single child each. The wriggling child. The reading the menu. And fifteen minutes later one of the sole parents was joined by its partner, a young mother bending down to hear the logorrheic child, while the young mother's new boyfriend who came in with her stood nervously at a distance, away from the table, uncertain where to go.

Why do I do this? Plant asked himself. The sudden pangs of nostalgia, dropped down air pockets of time, some evocative moment, some archetype-triggered memory. Or false memory. Am I tuning in to their situation? Or am I getting it all wrong?

Was he reading the wrong story into everything? Getting the wrong answers again? Was this all fantasy, lower astral thought-form games for when he didn't have a newspaper to read? He could have thought to bring one. Keep in mental contact with his employer. In touch with the wavelength. Could've. But every day fewer people bought newspapers. Why should he go against communal wisdom?

And then he saw Dorritt. Heard him blunder into a chair. Crumpled brown shirt, unpressed brown synthetic fibre trousers. In the city he would have been invisible. Your everyday academic or derelict on the streets of Newtown or

Glebe. In the middle of Byron he stood out, so seedy, so urban, so much the city sewer rat amidst the parakeet norm.

The norm, reflected Plant. How useful it was for revealing departures from itself.

'You found me then,' said Dorritt, coming over and beaming down at Plant.

'What makes you think I was looking for you?' Plant asked.

Dorritt's face fell. The lines of the moustache. The jut of the beard, if jut it could be called, the stray furry strands in the winnowing wind.

'Have a seat,' said Plant quickly, before he went away again.

Dorritt grinned, confident again.

'I thought if you were any good you would be able to work it out,' he said, sitting down.

'Work what out?'

'Where I'd gone.'

'And where did you go?'

'Here, obviously,' said Dorritt with surprise. 'Here.'

'And why here?'

His face took on a look of low cunning.

'I thought you would have worked that out,' he said.

Plant went for a look of lofty disdain.

'Wine?' he asked. The soul of generosity transcending low cunning.

There was always the chance he wouldn't be able to finish the bottle himself. Not stoned. That was the nature of being stoned. It created appetites you didn't have. A pizza, a bottle of red wine to accompany the red tomato paste, the visual appropriateness. Looked good. No problem with the pizza. Far from it. But when it came to drinking, the body resisted. Grass was in possession, it repelled the boarding wine. So he could enact the soul of generosity, share the blood of the lord with poor dowdy Dorritt, put some colour in his cheeks, soothe him, woo him, break some garlic bread, all he had to do was

attract the waiter's attention and get another glass. And he did. The waiter's attention had been focused on Dorritt from the moment he entered.

'Cheers,' said Dorritt. 'I thought you would work it out. Did Huxter tell you?'

'He didn't tell me anything.'

'No, I didn't think he would. He'd have every reason not to.'

'And why's that?'

'It's a long story,' said Dorritt.

'I've got all evening,' said Plant.

'No, it's the story I'm writing,' said Dorritt. 'The true story. But you should never talk about what you're going to write.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes. Otherwise you end up not writing it. You lose the impetus once you've told it.'

Was that why Huxter had hired him? To go get Dorritt to tell his story so he would never write it? Would Huxter's mind work like that?

'It's a basic rule they teach in writing workshops. Or it was in the one I went to.'

'So why did you lure me up here?'

Dorritt giggled. He spilled a few drops of wine on his shirt and helped himself to a slice of Plant's pizza.

'I didn't exactly lure you,' he said. Coyly.

'But you wanted me to come here.'

'I thought if you were interested in the story you might want to see the scene of the crime.'

'Crime?' said Plant.

'Yes,' said Dorritt.

His face became serious, pensive, almost tearful.

'I think it was a crime.'

'Tell me,' said Plant, 'tell me what you've already written. There won't be any danger of not writing that if you've already written it.'

'You're sure?'

'Logic,' said Plant.

'I never understood logic,' said Dorritt. 'That's why I studied literature and history.'

'Do you want to order?' Plant asked.

'Order? My thoughts?'

'A pizza.'

'Do you think I should? I seem to have been eating yours.'

He giggled disarmingly.

'I think you should,' said Plant.

They went back to the beach resort with a take-away pizza for Dorritt and sat on the deck outside Plant's cabin. Dorritt dowsed himself in citronella insect repellent to ward off mosquitoes. Plant relied on smoking a joint. Dorritt declined.

'I might go crazy again,' he said. He grinned, ingratiatingly, and gave a madman's titter. 'I wouldn't want to put you to all that trouble. Getting me admitted and everything.'

'Thanks,' said Plant.

'I'm serious,' said Dorritt.

'So am I,' said Plant.

'It's hard to get admitted these days.'

'Is that so,' said Plant.

'I wouldn't mind a coffee,' said Dorritt.

'Instant do?'

'Instant's fine,' said Dorritt.

'It isn't,' said Plant. 'But it's all there is.'

He boiled up some water, poured it over the coffee, added milk and sugar, and delivered the cup to Dorritt.

'Let's go,' he said, helping himself to some of Dorritt's pizza.

Patient. Not letting his impatience show. It was like feeding wild birds. One careless move and off they flew.

Sixteen

In Dorritt's account it was a privileged world. A secret garden. An idyll he had strayed into and never wanted to leave. He had visited them in their rambling house in Balmain. The grounds down to the water. The boatshed. The towers and turrets. He had always wanted to live somewhere with towers and turrets. A castle somewhere. He had always wanted to live beside water, to wake in the morning and walk down lawns to the water's edge, barnacles clustering on the boatshed piles, fish silently moving in the dappled light and shade. Angela sat on the old stone wall and fished. The smell of fresh coffee wafted across the lawns, mingling with hibiscus and frangipani, honeysuckle, jasmine.

'Of course I didn't see all of that at first,' he explained.

When he arrived it was just a gate in a fence. He knew there were reaches of the harbour around but it was not a suburb with which he had any familiarity. Old sea captains' mansions, run down, divided up into rooming houses. Pokey dockworkers' cottages. An air of unemployment and criminality pervaded.

He gave his sharp barking laugh.

'Appropriate, really,' he said. 'Now it's all movie people and accountants and drug dealers.'

They were sitting around a big table when he arrived. Some of them, anyway. Drinking coffee. Rolling joints. The record player playing Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen, Maria Muldaur and Linda Ronstadt. It may have been the kitchen table. But it had the air of a boardroom. Directors' meeting. Council of war.

It used to be the fashion. The kitchen table. It became the central icon for houses like that.

'Funny, really, how they all did that,' Dorritt reflected. 'Sat round the table in the middle of the morning. Or the afternoon. Or the evening for that matter.'

A bowl of fruit, maybe. Bananas, oranges, apples. Nothing he especially wanted to eat. The peaches and mangoes had always been taken. If they were ever there. The idyll of eternal spring in eternal autumn suggested they were there. Or had been. But he never recalled seeing them. Not in Balmain.

And the newspapers and magazines.

'It was always the same,' said Dorritt.

Or nearly the same. The poetry magazine people would have piles of poetry magazines on the table. The political editors would have political magazines. And newspapers. International papers. Some still rolled and sealed and unwrapped. And books too. Maybe the small press publishers had more books scattered on the table and the political editors more newspapers. Only the poets had poetry. 'So if the conversation became too difficult you could just pick up something and read it.'

'Too difficult?' said Plant.

'Oh, too political, too abstruse, you know. Or too embarrassing. Personal stuff. That sort of thing.'

'And did it?'

'Did it what?'

'Become too political. Or too personal.'

Dorritt reflected. He pushed his glasses up from his nose onto his forehead. That way he would look at whoever was talking and not see them. Just a smudge. A sort of undifferentiated blur where their features used to be. Face and nose and that sort of thing.

'To be honest,' he said.

Plant waited.

'To be honest I find most conversations difficult. Really. One way or another.'

'So you did a lot of reading.'

'I came across a lot of publications I might otherwise have missed,' he said. 'Little magazines I hadn't heard of. Fugitive pamphlets. Ephemera. It was good in that way. It meant I could be more comprehensive.'

'Sitting in embarrassment at the kitchen table.'

'It wasn't always embarrassment,' said Dorritt. 'Sometimes it was….'

He took off his glasses and rubbed them with a tissue he had found in his trouser pocket.

'Magical,' he said. 'Quite magical.'

He finished his polishing and peered at the glasses before putting them back on.

'And beautiful,' he said, smiling, his shy, nervous, almost endearing smile.

'It seemed so beautiful. At first.'

'It was like a William Morris vision. All these pre-Raphaelite girls wandering past in robes and shawls, all the colours, drapes and cushions and art work. That was when I realised.'

'Realised what?' Plant asked.

'Life is art.'

'Uh-huh.'

'Your life should have the beauty and design of art. Every little detail. The cups you drink from, the chairs you sit on.'

Plant looked at Dorritt, furry and fuzzy in his beard and greasy hair and dull browns and khaki.

'And they were living it. Producing this paper, espousing these politics.'

'Espousing what politics?' Plant asked.

'Oh,' Dorritt sighed, a long, deep sigh, like the deep withdrawing sea. 'It was really hard to pin them down. They were for revolution, of course. A total revolution. Art and life. Like William Morris. Culture and politics.'

'All that smudgy printing and erratic typesetting.'

'Yes,' said Dorritt. He gave his irritating smile, that one of possessive love for everything he had ever encountered and catalogued.

'Hardly the Kelmscott Press,' said Plant.

'How could it be?' said Dorritt sharply. 'Time goes on. Art changes. Different conditions produce different aesthetics. You couldn't have had hand-set type and hand printing.'

'Why not?' asked Plant.

'It wouldn't have been right. It would have been anachronistic.'

'Of course,' said Plant.

'I don't remember the men very clearly,' said Dorritt. 'Not in the Balmain house. They were there, of course. But shadowy. Huxter, I suppose. Ollie. And others. But I don't remember very clearly at all.'

But the women. He remembered them.

Angela was very sharp. Cutting. But friendly. It wasn't like she was attacking you personally. It was just her manner. The first time he saw her she was fishing. Off the end of the garden. There was an old stone wall the sea came up to. And she sat on the end there with this line. He asked her what she was fishing for and she said sharks.

'Sharks?'

'Sharks.'

'Can you eat them?'

'I can eat anything,' she said. Baring her teeth.

'Do they come here?'

'We shall see.'

'Have you caught any yet?'

'You do ask a lot of questions,' she said.

Dorritt sat on the sea wall beside her.

'And eels,' she said.

'Eels?'

'Eels and bugs.'

'Bugs?'

'Balmain bugs.'

'I don't know whether she ever caught anything,' said Dorritt. 'But that's how I remember her. All summery and golden brown and the light bouncing off the water and the water lapping against the old stone wall.'

'They eat shark in Victoria,' Plant said. 'They call it flake. That's what you get when you buy fish and chips.' It was one of the things he knew, a piece of trivia he liked to be able to impart. Dorritt seemed uninterested.

'And then there was Rose mooning around the house,' said Dorritt.

'Mooning?'

'She just seemed to glide around.'

'Like a planetary object?'

'Like she wasn't walking. She would drift from room to room. Along the dark corridors. Down the staircase. Eating a peach. Smoking a joint. Just wafting by like a cloud in a summer sky.'

'The problem was, they just weren't very helpful. They were terribly nice. When you got used to them. But you could never pin them down. Like how often did the paper come out?'

'When it's ready,' Rose told him.

'But when's that? Every month? Every other month?'

'Something like that,' said Rose.

'That's the difference between twelve issues a year and six.'

'Is it?' said Rose.

'Yes. Which should I put down?'

'Twelve seems an awful lot,' said Rose. 'We sort of work on an issue and it takes the time it takes. And then in the fullness of time it's delivered.'

'Who's the editor?' he asked.

'The editor?' said Angela. 'What do you mean who's the editor?'

'Well, who's in charge? Who decides what goes in?'

'You do have a schoolteacher's vision, darling,' said Angela. 'Why should anyone decide?'

'Surely someone has to.'

'We are all editors,' said Angela. 'Everyone has edited and all shall have prizes.'

'What sort of prizes?'

'People who ask questions,' she said.

'I don't understand.'

'They're a great prize,' said Angela. 'Hook one of them and who knows?'

'Who knows?'

'You could be set for life. We could keep you in a goldfish tank and whenever we needed some questions we'd be able to go down and open the lid.'

He laughed nervously.

'Or like a chook box. We could give you some scraps of paper and a pen and you could write down your questions and leave them in the straw. We'd come and collect them every morning. What have we got today? Wow, that's a big one, that must be a double-yolker.'

She looked at him carefully.

'Mind you, you'd have to keep on producing them. We couldn't have you going broody. We couldn't keep feeding you handfuls of grain if you didn't deliver. Stop delivering questions and that would be it. Put you in a chook raffle. Wring your neck and pull out your feathers. Pop you in the boiler.'

Her teeth flashing at him in the glorious sun.

Seventeen

'It was one of those households where there were always visitors. People coming to stay. People passing through. I found it very confusing. Especially at first. I didn't know who was who. I would ask about the paper and they wouldn't know. Normally it wouldn't take me long. I'd visit someone, some magazine, talk to them. It might only take half an hour. A bit longer. But a couple of hours at the outside. Then I'd have to write it all up, of course. That took time. Listening to the tapes and transcribing them. Sometimes I'd have to go back. If something wasn't clear. Some detail. If I couldn't catch what they said. Or I'd realise when I wrote up an entry that some detail was missing. Or contradictory. That sort of thing. So I might have to go back. Just briefly. But that was it, usually. And I'd done a lot of the basic work in the library. So I had a sort of skeleton of information.

'But with these, I didn't even have the skeleton. Like how often if came out. Or how to subscribe to it. Let alone who edited it. Who was responsible for what. Layout. Design.

'I could never seem to pin anyone down. If I did it was the wrong person. Someone just passing through who didn't know anything about it. Or worse, someone who had nothing to do with it, really, but talked as if they did. They'd rave on and then I'd realise it was pointless.

'The girls were nice. But they were very vague. And the men, they were always going off somewhere. Or busy. I could never get them to sit down and talk. That was why I had to keep going back. At first. I'd make an arrangement to interview them and they wouldn't be there. I'd sit around and wait. Talk to someone else. Rose. Or Angela. No one seemed to mind.

There were always people sitting round the table. Making coffee. It was quite pleasant, actually.

'Except I'd given myself a timetable. To get it all done. Otherwise it could have gone on forever.'

He laughed.

'Maybe that's what I should have done. Dragged it out. Made it a research project for life.'

He shook his head.

'Funny how when you're young you're so conscientious. Don't you think?'

Plant made his non-committal noise. He wasn't sure that he did think. Not that.

'I was terribly conscientious,' said Dorritt. 'That was why I'd been so shattered about my thesis. I'd been meticulous with that. Absolutely meticulous. And then Professor Oates had said it wasn't good enough.'

He took off his glasses again and rubbed his eyes.

'So I was determined to be meticulous about this. And they were making it hard for me. Not deliberately.'

He paused.

'Or maybe it was deliberate. Sometimes I thought they were deliberately avoiding me. Deliberately avoiding answering questions. It was hard to tell. The girls were so nice about it. About everything. But it was getting embarrassing. Going round there all the time and getting nowhere. I felt I was intruding.'

He laughed again.

'I suppose I was, really. And I started feeling like an outsider. And it's not nice feeling you're an outsider all the time. That's what it was getting like. Sitting round that table.

'And then I went round there one day and they'd gone. Moved out. Totally new people there. I couldn't believe it. I think it was a women's collective. They weren't friendly. They

all had short hair and wore dungarees. And their dogs barked at me all the time.'

'They've gone?'
'Yes.'
'Left?'
'Yes.'
'Where to?'
'No idea.'
'But they must have gone somewhere.'
'Sure. But we don't know.'
'They didn't tell you.'
'We never met them.'
'They must have left a forwarding address.'
'Not with us. Try the post office.'
'I can't believe it.'
'Suit yourself.'

'I couldn't believe it. All that time I'd been sitting there, talking to them, they must have known they were moving. And no one said. Not even a hint.

'That was when I suppose I became suspicious. If people have nothing to hide they don't mind telling you things. They must have had something to hide.

'I was hurt. But that didn't matter. That was merely personal. Now I suppose I realised they were up to something. It made my whole project real. It gave it a point. Here was a political paper that didn't want information about it recorded. They'd given me the slip. There had to be a reason.

'So in a way it made me feel better. After I'd got over being upset. Now it was like I had a mission. Before, I'd wondered sometimes. I'd enjoyed doing it. Meeting all the editors. Printers. It was good. But it hadn't seemed that serious. I mean,

sometimes I'd wondered, is this really worth doing? Taxpayers' money and all that. Was I just wasting it?

'But now I realised it wasn't a waste at all. Now I realised there was a reason for what I was doing. Now it was real.

'And yet part of me still couldn't believe it. That they'd just gone, without saying anything. Without even saying they were going to go. I even went round again. To make sure. In case, I don't know, in case I'd got the wrong house or dreamed it or something. They must have thought I was mad.'

'Weren't you round here before?'

'Yes.'

'Yesterday?'

'Yes, but...'

'Didn't we tell you they weren't here?'

'Yes, but...'

'But, but, but. Butt off, boy.'

'Yes.'

'And don't come back.'

'No.'

They waited there, the door half open, the dogs barking.

'So go.'

'You're sure they didn't leave an address?'

'Didn't you ask that yesterday?'

'Yes, but...'

'So you've got your answer.'

'I just wondered...'

'So wander. Now.'

That was when they let the dogs out.

'They weren't at all friendly. It was odd, really. I mean, if they had nothing to do with them, why care? It was as if they did know where they'd gone. And weren't telling. As if they were connected, somehow.

'I went up to the post office. To see if there was a forwarding address. They wouldn't tell me.'

'Can't tell you that.'

'But I want to get in touch with them.'

'No doubt.'

'But I know them.'

'How do we know that?'

'Well...'

'And how do we know they want to know you?'

'I'm not a debt collector or anything.'

'That's what they all say.'

'But I'm not.'

'Tell you what,' the post office person said. 'Tell you what. Write a letter to them.'

'But I don't know where they are. That's what I want to do.'

'Easy, then. Write it to the old address. And we'll forward it. If we've got a forwarding address, that is. And I'm not saying we do. Or don't. And then if they want you to get in touch with them they can write back. Can't they?'

'But they didn't. I wrote. I said I needed to finalise a few details about the paper. For the entry. I gave them my address. And phone number. But they didn't write back. Or phone.

'I suppose it all might have ended there,' Dorritt said. 'Or that part of it. I still carried on with the project, of course. You've no idea how many little magazines and small presses were springing up then. It was like a renaissance. A cultural rebirth. And I was in the middle of it. I couldn't believe my luck, sometimes. There were the bad things, of course. My thesis, for instance. And the way the *Rites* people had just vanished. That upset me. But if I didn't think about those things, it was fine. That was what I was learning. Not to think about the bad things. Not repress them. Just not think about them.'

'Is there a difference?' Plant asked.

Dorritt laughed. His nervous, ingratiating, immensely irritating laugh.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Perhaps there isn't. Perhaps that was the cause of my problem. An underlying cause. I don't know.'

He became lost in reverie.

'So you stopped thinking about them.'

'Yes. I might never have seen them again. I mean, I had enough information to give some sort of entry on them. I could look through the back issues and list contributors. And the sort of things they wrote about. I'd picked up copies. It would have done. It wouldn't have been as complete as I wanted it. But it would have done. I'm not an obsessive.'

He laughed, challenging Plant to dispute.

'And then their "Back to Nature" issue came out. "Birds in the Bush". With them all naked on the cover. Rose. And Angela. And the rest.'

'And it hit you where you lived.'

'Yes,' said Dorritt. He giggled. 'Something like that.'

'Stirred up the juices.'

'I was young,' said Dorritt. 'I had normal desires. Urges.'

'I don't doubt it,' said Plant. Or did he?

'I saw it in a newsagent's. It quite took my breath away.'

He raised his glasses to his brow again, rubbed the back of his head with the palm of his hand, breathing deeply.

'We weren't used to that sort of thing at that time. Till that time, anyway,' he said.

'So?'

'So? So I bought a copy, of course. And then I looked for the address.'

'After you'd feasted on the cover.'

'No, straight away. I opened it up straight away.'

'And?'

'Oh yes, there was an address. Not a street address. A post office box. But it was still an address. A post office box at Byron Bay. So I knew where they were. The district, anyway. I figured it couldn't be hard to find them. Somebody would know. It's not a big place. It was even smaller, then.'

'So you set off in hot pursuit.'

'Yes,' said Dorritt.

He giggled.

'Just like you did after me,' he said.

Eighteen

Dorritt descended on them. From his point of view it was more like ascended. They were the world he aspired to. Girls in sarongs gently ministering around him. Creativity on every wall. Posters, screen prints, photographs. Mobiles hanging from the ceiling. And amidst it all the paper. The word made material. Columns of words. How to be an urban terrorist. How to cure your own marijuana. How to achieve new consciousness. How to raze and destroy the bad old world.

He tracked them down. Using his research skills.

'I thought I'd put them to some practical use,' he said. 'My research skills. They didn't seem to have done me much good with my thesis. Not that that was my fault. That was sabotaged by my supervisor. Though I only realised that later. When I'd got my confidence back. When I realised I had these skills and they worked. And they did work. That was how I tracked them down.'

Simple things. The post office box of the paper was a start. It gave him a postal district. The printer's name. They were alternative but not that underground. They still followed the legalities of the times and gave the printer's name. Or maybe the printer gave it. Anyway, it was given.

'It was just a matter of a few phone calls really,' he said. 'And maps. Detailed maps. Large scale. All in the State Library.'

All the resources he needed. And the knowledge of how to use them, of course.

'Of course,' Plant nodded.

You'd need to be a half wit not to use them, he reflected. But there again, there was the matter of the motivation to get yourself into town and into the library and onto the phone and all that.

'And the motivation,' Plant added, to participate in the conversation in more than the monosyllabic, or duosyllabic, way that was his basic inclination.

'Oh yes, I had the motivation,' said Dorritt. 'After all, it was a project. It was my work. I was being paid to do it.'

Not necessarily strong motivators in Plant's experience.

'And the girls, too,' he suggested.

'Yes,' Dorritt agreed. 'The girls.'

'How did you get there?' Plant asked.

'I took a bus. It was only about twelve hours from Sydney.'

'To the front door?'

'No. To Byron Bay. But that was a subterfuge. That was where they had a postbox, but they weren't there at all. They might have been there at first but they'd moved on out into the country. I took a taxi out to the farm.'

'They were living on a farm?'

'Yes.'

'That must have cost.'

'I think Rose had come into an inheritance. Or a trust fund or something. Her family was well off.'

'I meant the taxi must have cost,' said Plant.

'It would have cost more to hire a car,' said Dorritt. 'And I don't drive.'

That would be right, thought Plant. Spooks never drove. They took taxis and tube trains and scuttled against the traffic flow through arcades and alleys and one-way streets and sewers. Great training for the bush.

'So how did you know where the farm was?'

'Oh, I asked around. It was a much smaller community in those days. They had this scene going. People knew where they were.'

'So you took the taxi to the front door.'

'Yes.'

'And kept it waiting?'

'No, I sent it back.'

'What if there'd been no one there?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'But they were there.'

'And you just plonked down your suitcase and said you'd come to stay.'

Dorritt tittered. 'Not quite like that. I had a rucksack, anyway.'

'What would you have done if they hadn't asked you to stay?'

'They didn't actually ask me,' Dorritt said. 'It wasn't like that. But people were always staying with them in Sydney.'

'Welcome to the crash-pad,' said Plant.

'That's right.'

'But if they'd said no?'

'I suppose I'd have had to call the taxi to pick me up.'

'Simple,' said Plant.

'It wouldn't have been that difficult.'

'And were they pleased to see you?' Plant asked. 'Big slobbering kisses all round?'

Dorritt tittered. He flushed a pale pink.

'They were surprised,' he said.

Huxter had looked out of the window when the taxi turned up. Dorritt saw his thin white face, peering through the glass like a fish in an aquarium.

'He didn't look pleased. But he never did, really. Only on rare occasions.'

Dorritt withdrew into silent reflection. Or something.

'What sort of occasions?' Plant asked, to prod him along.

Dorritt shuddered. Then he reassembled his smiling, ramshackle face and continued.

'No one came to the door. So I knocked.'

Still no one came so he tried the handle. It was locked. He left his rucksack on the verandah and walked round the house.

Round the water tank. Round the woodpile. The back door was locked too.

'But I'd seen Huxter's face so I knew they were there. I knew he was there, anyway. So I just sat on the old couch on the verandah and waited. I got bitten by midges.'

In the end they cracked. Or Rose did. The door suddenly opened and she was there. Smiling at him.

'I thought I heard something,' she said. 'But we were sort of' – she smiled suggestively, fingered the button of her blouse as if to do it up, and undid it – 'otherwise engaged.'

'That's all right,' Dorritt said.

It wasn't. The thought that she might have been making love to Huxter hurt like a wrench in the stomach. Irrationally. What claims had he? How could it be jealousy? Envy, perhaps? But it was more proprietorial than that, the way it hurt.

'You'd better come in,' she said.

He followed her in.

'Take a seat.'

The ever-present kitchen table. The bowl of fruit. Not just bananas now but passion-fruit, mangoes, the nectarine and curious peach, fruits of this other Eden, this perpetual fruiting paradise.

'Cup of tea?' she said. Asked, but filled up the kettle anyway and put it on the stove.

Ollie the American wandered in, all Hawaiian shirt and baggy shorts.

'Howdy, lover boy,' he said, blowing Dorritt a kiss across the room.

Dorritt felt himself blushing, heating up further despite the heat, sweating as much as Ollie who always seemed to be sweating.

Ollie sat at the table and rummaged around.

'Time for the pipe of peace,' he said.

He produced a packet of rolling tobacco from one shirt pocket and a bag of dope from the other.

'And what brings you up here?'

'I thought I'd drop by,' said Dorritt.

'On the way to wherever.'

Dorritt nodded.

'And where would that be?'

'Where would what be?'

'Wherever.'

Dorritt shrugged.

'Here,' he said. 'I've still got some questions to ask.'

'I bet,' said Ollie.

'Just to complete the...'

Huxter came in silently and joined them at the table. His arrival threw Dorritt, leaving him lost in mid-sentence. Maybe he was looking for signs of lovemaking, sweat, the fresh smell of a shower, a smirk, anything. But Huxter neither smirked nor smiled. Nor spoke.

'The files?' said Ollie.

'The entry, yes,' said Dorritt.

'Shoot,' said Ollie. 'Let's do it now, then you can go on your way.'

Dorritt floundered, flustered.

'Maybe he doesn't have a way to go,' said Rose.

'Is that so?' said Ollie. 'Have you lost your way, is that it?'

'Well,' said Dorritt.

'Well?' said Ollie.

'I thought I might stay here a couple of days or so,' said Dorritt. 'If that's all right, of course.'

'Welcome to the crash-pad,' said Rose.

'We're full,' said Huxter, in his Middle-Eastern innkeeper's voice.

'Every room occupied,' Ollie elaborated.

'Oh, I don't need a room,' said Dorritt.

'You wanna share?' said Ollie. Smiling.

'No spare beds,' said Huxter.

'You wanna share my bed?' said Ollie.

'I've got a sleeping bag,' said Dorritt. 'I can sleep on the verandah.'

'A sleeping bag?' said Ollie. 'You are well prepared. Quite the boy scout.'

Dorritt smiled. Until he realised that no one else did. Not Huxter or Ollie, anyway. He couldn't tell about Rose. She had her back to him, making the tea.

Someone put The Band on the record player: I just need some place where I can lay my head.

Nineteen

'So I slept out on the verandah,' Dorritt said. 'The sky was so clear. You could see the satellites tracking by. At first I thought they were shooting stars and I made wishes.'

'What sort of wishes?'

'They don't come true if you tell them to people,' said Dorritt.

'But they weren't shooting stars anyway.'

'Later they were. Later there were lots of them.'

'I don't think Huxter ever liked me,' Dorritt said. 'The first time I met him, Rose shared a joint with me, and I got very stoned and talkative and, well, enthusiastic. Like one does. And he kept looking at me. I think he thought I was uncool. He just kept looking across the table. Saying nothing. And I suppose I was sort of babbling on. And laughing. It was good to laugh. I hadn't laughed like that for a long time. Rose was all right. She didn't mind. But Huxter seemed to. And he was always cold after that. Always. Not that he was ever very warm.'

Plant could see it. The table. The eternally uncool Dorritt. The everlastingly cool Huxter.

'Was that when you went up there, or in Sydney?'

'I don't know,' said Dorritt. 'I can't remember.'

He went vague and then tittered nervously.

'Probably both, to be honest,' he said. 'But I think that first evening at the farm I got very stoned. It was the relief at finding them again. I felt relaxed, you know. Happy. And I showed it. I think the thing about Huxter was he could never show his emotions. I didn't know that at the time. At the time, at first, he seemed very cool. Very sophisticated. You know what I mean,' he said, almost imploringly.

'I know the concept,' said Plant.

'Poker-faced. He's probably very good at poker. He sat there without an expression. Supercilious, I suppose you could call it.'

'Supercilious isn't an expression?' said Plant.

'No other expression, then,' said Dorritt. 'And I suppose it sort of freaked me out. You know, when people refuse to respond to you, you feel the need to make them respond.'

'No,' said Plant.

'You must be like Huxter,' Dorritt said. 'But when I'm in that situation I try and break through. Generate some warmth. Make jokes.'

Spare us, said Plant. Silently.

'And when you're stoned everything seems hilarious. At least it used to. But Huxter got colder and colder.'

'So he didn't seem hilarious,' said Plant.

'No. The exception to the rule,' said Dorritt. '"You've never smoked before?" he said to me.'

'I thought you said he didn't say anything.'

'He said that. As if I was uncool. But I had, of course. Smoked before. Lots of the small press people smoked. And poets. Pretty well all the poets. And the alternative lifestyle people, of course. I'd sat and smoked with all of them.'

'Did you tell him that?'

'Yes, I did.'

'What did he say?'

'He just asked who.'

'Who?'

'Who they were.'

'Their names, you mean.'

'Yes.'

'And you told him.'

'Yes.'

'You listed everyone you'd ever done dope with.'

'The ones I could remember.'

'And what did he say?'

'He didn't say anything.'

'What did the others say?'

'Ollie said he liked to see a boy enjoying himself. Laugh and the world laughs with you. He loved laughing boys, he said.'

'So a jolly evening all round.'

'It was a bit strained.'

'And then you slept on the verandah.'

'In my sleeping bag. It was amazing. The sky was so clear. All these millions of stars. You never see them like that in the city. And owls.'

The first rays of the sun touched the tops of the trees.

'Gilding them,' Dorritt said. 'It sounds poetic but it was literal. The tops were touched with gold. It's something you never see in the city, somehow. Not that there aren't trees.'

'No,' agreed Plant.

The gentrification of inner-city Sydney had led to large-scale planting of trees. Natives. Having exterminated the natives they planted new arboreal ones. Less troublesome ones. Ones that didn't spear sheep or get drunk on government handouts. But nothing was without trouble. Especially not trees. The leaves clogged up the gutters and the rainwater overflowed into the roof and brickwork and rotted the beams and lured the termites up. The roots broke into the sewers and clogged them, pierced the water-mains, contaminated the water with seepage from the broken sewer pipes. And the leaves and flowers and seeds and branches fell on the cars in the street and dented their roofs and corroded their duco. The old working class suburbs had always been denuded of trees, just the odd poisonous oleander bush, or cotoneaster with its red berries, or night-scented jasmine, overlaying the soft smell of the dunnies down the end of the yard, in the days of the night-cart men. The working classes had a point. The working classes knew a

thing or two, or know, Plant mused, sucking on a joint while Dorritt droned away. Why was he thinking of the inner city when he was up here are the Bay? Was it Dorritt's remorseless inner-city garb, his dowdy crumpled brown polyester trousers, his drip-dry drooping polyester short-sleeved brown shirt? And I should be critical, Plant reflected, in his denim workshirt and jeans. Where were the Hawaiian shirts and the sarongs?

Dorritt introduced one. A sarong. Wrapped around young Rose in the gilded early morning. Walking round the unkempt lawns, bent over, peering at the grass. She moved along like a tea-picker, said Dorritt, exotically, romantically.

'Sweated labour,' reflected Plant.

'Exactly,' said Dorritt. 'That was what I thought. Exhaustion. Pain.'

Already in the early morning, the sun just gilding the crowns of the trees.

'Are you all right?' Dorritt asked her.

'No, I'm not fucking all right,' Rose said.

He blushed. He was not used to women swearing. Not in those days.

'Of course, everything has changed now,' he explained.

'Fucking oath,' Plant agreed.

'I asked her what was the matter,' Dorritt said.

'I'm out of fucking dope.'

'Oh,' said Dorritt. 'Can I do anything?'

'You got a deal?'

He gave his nervous titter.

'Why do I ask?' Rose asked.

'I'm sorry. If I can...'

'You can help me look for roaches.'

'Roaches?'

'Yes, we can roll them up and smoke them.'

'Cockroaches!'

He shuddered. Involuntarily. He had no control over it. She roared with laughter.

'Not cockroaches, you dill,' she said. 'These.'

She showed him a handful of butts. Joints she had smoked and stubbed out wherever she had been sitting. Now she was prowling around wherever a chair might have been on the grass, collecting them to roll up.

'Are they all right?'

'It's all there is.'

'But does it still work?'

'Does what still work?'

'The THC.'

'Oh, he knows the chemical terms,' she said. 'Fancy that. Who taught you that?'

He smiled. Ingratiatingly. After all, he was on a job. This was work.

'But he doesn't seem to know that THC isn't water-soluble, so roaches left out in the rain and dew remain as good as new. Almost. Plus the bonus of bandicoot piss and wallaby shit.'

She smiled at him.

'*Cucaracha en sauce urine de bandicoot avec merde de wallaby.*'

He helped her look.

'When we get nine we roll them up.'

They got eighteen and she rolled a couple and they sat there on the wooden garden bench. Dorritt declined.

'You're a gentleman, 'Rose said. 'Twice as much for me. I'll love you for life.'

'And I really thought she did,' Dorritt said.

Great black and white butterflies fluttered around them, smaller iridescent blue ones, vivid small saffron ones. Dragonflies darted over the grass and climbed high up to the trees, maneuvering like World War I biplanes doing stalls, dives, dizzying climbs.

'It's like paradise,' he said, looking at her, this extraordinary Eve.

'It's pretty cool,' she agreed.

'Though I can't remember butterflies.'

'In paradise?'

'In *Paradise Lost*,' he said.

'I guess you really are a bibliographer,' she said. 'Life through print. I guess you'd have had a hard time in Eden till they learned how to make paper. Cut down a few trees. Though they could have used hemp. Makes excellent paper.'

She looked round reflectively.

'What you've got to do,' she told him, 'is learn to read the Book of Nature.'

'How do I do that?'

'Would you like me to give you some lessons?'

'Oh, yes,' he said, eagerly.

She laughed again. All around birds were singing, whistling, warbling, trilling, calling out to them.

'We'll see,' she said, with her slow, lazy grin.

'Later, when I was sick, when I had my breakdown, I understood her dependency. I used to get desperate for my tablets if they were late bringing them round. I understood how people could kill for drugs. I was sympathetic then. Not that I wasn't sympathetic before. But later I understood more.

'I went round looking for more roaches for her that afternoon, but in the meantime she'd found the remains of another deal.'

'No,' she said, refusing his collected scraps. 'No good for you. All that ash and tar. Give me a clean, healthy smoke any time.'

She rolled one up, shared it with him and, as profligate as ever again, tossed the stub onto the grass.

'You don't want to save it?'

'No.'

'For when you run out again.'

She waved an airy hand.

'I can't bear all that penny-pinching behaviour,' she said.

'It's not dangerous?'

'What's not dangerous?'

'Throwing them down on the grass like that. It won't start a bush fire?'

'See for yourself,' she said. 'Stub it out if you're so worried. Get yourself a jam jar and keep your roaches in it.'

The crows cawed derisively from the tops of the camphor laurels. A black cockatoo called out.

'Rain,' she said.

'Really? How do you know?'

'Country knowledge,' she said. 'And you don't usually get bushfires when it rains,' she added.

'Still…,' he couldn't stop himself saying.

She looked at him steadily.

'Are you some kind of fucking policeman or something?'

He felt himself blushing.

'No, no, no.'

'Rural fire service?'

'No, no.'

'Good.'

'Absolutely not.'

'That's a relief.'

'Positive.'

'Don't protest too much,' she said. 'Otherwise I'll start to disbelieve you.'

The anxiety on his face was palpable. She burst out laughing.

'Here, officer, have a smoke and steady your nerves,' she said.

She walked back to the house, leaving him with it.

'Don't forget to stub it out,' she said. 'Then swallow the evidence.'

Twenty

He woke early the next morning, out on the verandah, scratching his midge bites. No one was moving inside the house. He walked down the steps, onto the grass, fending off the fresh strands of cobwebs that had been spun between the house and the trees in the night. Amidst the long, uncut grass the bees hummed with a high, firm note, a high-energy early morning work hum, gathering pollen from the meadow flowers that were blooming, blue and white and yellow. It was as if all nature were integrated in some spinning dynamo, generating the power to go on. And the finches and honeyeaters and tiny wrens twittered and chattered like little stabbing needles decorating the surface with needlework. And a few mosquitoes whined past, making the most of the last of the half-light. He rolled down his sleeves and pulled his socks up. But the mosquitoes vanished as the sun touched more of the earth. And the cicadas started up like an outdoor factory of massed sewing machines.

It was an hour or more before anyone stirred, an hour and a half, maybe two hours. He went in eagerly to join them at the breakfast table. Rose in a diaphanous nightdress, Angela in an exotic dressing-gown, all birds and snakes from some oriental bestiary. Ollie waddled out in short pajamas. There was some visitor clad in a towel. Huxter alone was fully dressed. And Dorritt, of course.

'We were going to make an early start,' said Huxter.

Angela lit a cigarette and groaned.

Rose busied herself making coffee.

'I am ready,' said the visitor.

Huxter glowered. At the visitor. At Angela. At Dorritt. At Ollie.

'Welcome to the prison farm,' said Ollie, yawning, standing in the doorway, gazing with satisfaction at the world of nature. 'Just listen to them whip-birds. Music on the ears.'

'There's no hurry,' said Angela.

'Yes there is,' said Huxter. 'I want to get moving on the next issue.'

'What issue?' said Rose.

'Come on, fat boy,' said Angela. 'You heard the man.'

'I do wish you wouldn't call me fat boy,' said Ollie. 'It's hurtful. I don't go around talking about chicks and molls.'

'Not any more.'

'No.'

'Not after we told you.'

'I learned.'

'Not without a few beatings.'

'Oh, yes,' said Ollie. 'They were delightful.'

Angela snorted. He smiled back.

'I love it when you're angry. And strict. Administering strict correction.' He gave a whinny of satisfaction. 'So I say chick no more. I say babe no more. No more molls. I don't call you girls. I don't call you ladies. Women is the only word to pass my lips.'

'Your lips offer me no delight,' Angela said.

He gave a *moue* of rich distastefulness. Marlene Dietrich. Mick Jagger. Luna Park.

'So if it's agreeable to you, I'd prefer it if you dropped this fat boy business.'

'OK, fat man,' said Angela.

'Fat man is no better.'

'What do you want to be called? Mount Olivet?'

'Witty,' said Ollie, 'but blasphemous.'

'Grassy Noll?'

'Even more so.'

'Meatloaf?'

'Now that I like,' said Ollie.

'I bet.'

'I'd like it right now.'

'Wouldn't we all,' said Angela.

'Huxter slack in his duty?'

'I'm through with duty,' said Angela. 'I want passion.'

'There's our young visitor.'

'I thought he might be more to your taste.'

'We should share him,' said Ollie. 'Straight away.'

They turned to Dorritt.

'Can we get on with business,' said Huxter.

'Business,' said Ollie.

Angela groaned.

'I can help,' said Dorritt.

All eyes turned to him.

'Can you, now?' said Ollie.

'Proofreading,' he volunteered.

'You need something typeset before you can proofread,' said Huxter.

'Or typesetting,' Dorritt offered. 'I can type.'

'And before typesetting,' said Huxter, 'you need something written.'

'I can…,' Dorritt began.

'And before you get something written you need to know what the editorial collective has decided is to be written about.'

'A fine analysis of the problem,' said Ollie.

'There is no problem,' said Huxter.

'You could've fooled me,' said Angela.

'That's never hard,' said Ollie.

'Anyway,' said Dorritt, 'anything. Odd jobs. I'd be happy to do anything.'

'You can cut the grass,' said Huxter.

'Cut the grass?' said Dorritt. 'I thought Rose said she'd run out again.'

'Mow the lawns, smartarse,' said Huxter.

It was not what he had had in mind. Not what he had hoped for. Not what he had expected. He tittered nervously.

'Show him where the mower is, someone,' said Huxter. 'Get him out of the fucking house and let's get started.'

So Dorritt sweated his way through the early morning, the grass long and neglected, the motor cutting out whenever the grass was too high or too thick. He would tug start it again, wiping the sweat from his brow, sweat really did form on the brow, it wasn't just an expression, he was fascinated to find, and the insect repellent Rose had kindly found for him dissolved with the sweat and ran down into his eyes, so they smarted and burned and he could no longer see. He was drenched with sweat, his hair, his neck, his chest, his back, his armpits, his groin, even the socks on his feet. He pushed the mower past the house and back, from end to end of the rough lawns, the sun now high and beating straight down, and the trees providing no protection. He tried to glance inside, through the windows, to the cool room, the table, the bowl of fruit, the editorial conference, the mysteries of creation, the mystique of media, and he could make out nothing. Nothing but sweat and smarting eyes and the sense of exclusion, of being eternally outside the inner sanctum, peering into the house like some sub-tropical Heathcliff or a slave on a southern plantation. The noise of the motor deafened him. The sweat and insect repellent blinded him. The dust and grass clippings flew up and choked him. And there was no relief.

Twenty One

Pigeons pecked around in the mown grass, flying up with a great whistling, fluttering of wings when Dorritt moved closer to examine them. Whip birds called out to each other in the distant undergrowth, the long high wheew, and the fierce concluding crack. Crows cawed and crowed from the treetops. A king parrot piped its single high, piping note. Up the mountain kookaburras laughed and cackled. A dove settled into its remorseless hooting. It was not a dawn chorus, it was long past dawn, and they were still at it. Dorritt sat out there on the verandah, scratching at his bites in quiet amazement.

And then Rose emerged, all white muslin and soft, golden suntan and smiles.

'Up you get,' she said.

'Up? Where?' he asked.

'The secret valley,' she said. 'We're going mushrooming. Then you'll learn how to read the Book of Nature.'

She led him along the track, across the paddock.

'This is the time to find them,' she said. 'With the morning dew still on them. Before the sun gets too hot.'

'How do you know where to find them?' Dorritt asked.

'You tune in,' said Rose. 'They call to you.'

He tittered. Disbelievingly, of course. But happily so.

'You'll see,' she said.

'What do they sound like?' he asked.

'It's not a sound,' she said. 'They speak to you. Telepathically. Without words. They let you know where they are.'

'What do they look like?'

'Golden,' she said. 'Nuggets of fairy gold, glowing in the grass.'

'Golden?' he said. 'I thought mushrooms were white.'

'So you do know what they look like.'

'Only from shops,' he said. 'Vegetable stalls.'

'Those are field mushrooms,' she said. 'If we see any of them we'll get them too.'

'What are we looking for, then?'

'Magic mushrooms, what did you think?'

'Magic mushrooms?'

'Gold tops,' she said.

'I don't know them,' he said.

'Look for cow pats,' she said. 'You need a field where cattle have been at some time. Or horses. Horses are even better. The spores need to go through the intestines of a cow or horse. That's how they germinate or something. So look for cow pats and little golden tops sticking through them.'

They found them. Cow pats and all.

She broke one off.

'See. See how the stem goes purple.'

He watched, and it did, slowly the broken stem turned purple.

'Psilocybin,' she said. 'If they don't do that, they're toadstools. If they don't do that you don't eat them. They make you sick.'

She gathered them, held up her dress to hold them in, her legs golden brown in the sun.

'We'll need more than this,' she said.

Dorritt spotted them. He felt proud, confident, competent.

'That's enough,' she said. 'Off you go.'

He picked them, handed them to her.

'No, those are yours,' she said. 'They were calling to you.'

He tittered.

'I didn't hear them,' he said.

'But you found them.'

He started to put them in his shirt pocket.

'What are you doing?' she asked. As if it was something terrible he was doing.

'Putting them in my pocket,' he said.

'What for?'

'To carry them.'

'Carry them where?' she asked. 'You'll crush them.'

'Back to the house.'

'No,' she said. 'You have to eat them where you find them. To appreciate them properly.'

'What, raw?'

She nodded.

'Here?'

She nodded again.

He looked at them doubtfully. The cow dung.

'Shouldn't they be washed?'

'Spit in your hand and wipe them if you're worried,' she said.

He was doubtful, more than doubtful, almost horrified. He felt in his trouser pocket for a handkerchief.

'Of course if they were amanitas you'd probably piss on them,' she said.

She squatted down, legs apart, for all the world as if she were going to do just that. Piss on them.

'The active principle stays in the urine if you eat amanitas,' she said. 'In Lapland they piss into the mushroom soup to recycle it.'

Dorritt swallowed, gagged, choked, coughed. He rubbed his haul with his handkerchief, as if he were buffing up a magic lantern.

'So,' she said, 'here we go.'

She raised the gold top to her lips, bit into it, chewed, swallowed.

'Now you,' she said.

He did the same, cautiously, a small nibble. He called out in disgust and spat it out.

'It tastes awful,' he said.

'It's not the taste,' she said. 'The taste you have to put up with.'

She picked up the partly chewed bits he had spat out and handed them back to him.

'Eat,' she said. 'Trust me.'

He trusted her and ate.

The snake slithered away through the grass.

They sat there in the meadow, sprawled on the grass, waiting for the psilocybin to take effect, Rose in her white muslin dress, Dorritt chewing a stalk of grass, shading his eyes against the sun.

'It takes a while. But it's quicker on an empty stomach. You didn't have breakfast, did you?'

'No,' said Dorritt. 'I didn't want to disturb people. And the door was locked, anyway.'

'That's good,' she said.

'So I couldn't have had breakfast, even if I'd wanted to.'

'Excellent,' she said. 'Have you tripped before?' she asked him.

'Tripped?' Dorritt asked.

'Ensnared with flowers I fall on grass,' she said. 'Done acid.'

'Acid? Oh, acid. LSD, you mean. No. No, not that I can remember.'

'You'd remember.'

'Then I haven't.'

'You'd never forget.'

'Really?'

'It changes you for life.'

Scarred for life, he said, to himself. Scarred for life, scared for life, just the difference of one letter. The letter killeth. One little R. One of the three little Rs. Or big Rs. Writhing, wreathing, and a-rhythmic.'

'Well, mushrooms are like acid.'

A pang of fear shot through him.

'Only better,' she added.

'Better?'

'Stronger.'

Not what he wanted to hear.

'Smoother.'

That was better.

'Softer. Gentler.'

'Like you,' he said. 'Soft and gentle.'

'Are you saying I'm some kind of mushroom?' she asked.

He looked at her. The white muslin dress, the golden glow of her skin, her peach-tinged cheeks, her red lips, suntanned face and arms and legs. All suffused with a golden glow. And plumped out, full, like a ripe peach, yes, but that was the obvious cliché, like a ripe mushroom, that was truer, newer, seventy per cent water, like the earth's surface, like the human body, it was a human body, like a mushroom then.

'Hey?' she asked.

He blinked, came back to her.

'I suppose I am,' he said.

She leaned across and kissed him on the cheek. And then she was standing, leaning down to him, reaching out her hand, pulling him up from the ground, leading him back to the house, through the sparkling meadow of the vibrating morning.

Twenty Two

He couldn't sit at the table. It was too rectangular. Squared and hewn. And slaughtered. A felled tree. Like a carcass of meat. He could see the carcasses hanging there, the doors of the meat van open, men in blood-stained white overalls and Wellington boots and white surgeons' hats, lifting the carcasses off the great iron meat hooks that impaled them, carrying them across the pavements, into the butchers' shops, the huge steel doors swung open, the freezing cold stores, lined with carcasses, rows and rows of meat trucks driving up, streams of men in blood-stained white with marbled white and red and blue carcasses on their backs.

He tried one of the old armchairs, its arms furry, furry moquette, was this moquette? What was moquette? Why was it called that? Because it was mock? Because it mocked? He examined the padded arms of the chair to see if it was mocking him; it gazed back imperturbably, its mocking potential enfolding him.

'So what's this survey really about?'

He heard the voice. But he wasn't sure where it came from. No, he knew where it came from, it came from the room, it came from a mocking armchair, but he wasn't sure whose voice it was. He tried to look at them but they kept dissolving. He looked at Huxter, where Huxter had been, but he had turned into a fish, a pallid, white fish, maybe a shark, predatory and menacing and sick, diseased, white fungus creeping over its face in striations, whatever striations were. And Ollie, Ollie dissolved into treacle pudding, the soft, crumbly face topped with golden syrup, dripping down over his eyes, reaching down his shoulders and arms like a lava of ants, lava carrying larva,

or larva carrying lava. And some other ghostly figure who had been there had gone and an ectoplasm held its place, wafting this way and that way in the breeze, but there was no breeze, nothing to dispel the heat that filled the room, climbed up his legs from the floor, into his back from the mocking chair, now he knew why it mocked, it was an electric chair and its electric heat was spreading all through him, rising into the underside of his thighs and pressing into his back and shoulders and rising up into his head which would burst unless he could dispel the heat into the room and melt all the hanging carcasses, soften their frozen forms till they went soft and viscid and rotted there, putrefying around him.

The electric chair began buzzing. A short, sharp, imperious, high-pitched drilling, it was an electric dentist's chair, and the electric dentist was drilling into his teeth, up through his wisdom teeth and into his brain, and at each buzz of the drill, at each touch, his brain exploded into blue, violet, crimson. And it was familiar, a familiar light, a familiar pain, a familiar sound. And now the electric dentist went away and it was the water pump, switched on whenever anyone turned on a tap, buzzing and buzzing, the water running and running, through the core of his brain, behind his eyes, and then he realised it was the shower, someone was taking a shower, why else did the pump keep straining, and it was Rose, he knew it, he could see her standing there naked, he could see through the solid walls, they were transparent, the water pouring over her rose red body, the pump singing its desperate song of penetration, drill, drill, drill, and the water ran over her breasts and belly and hair in translucent globules, beading there, glued jewels of morning dew. He smiled.

'Amanitas are even stronger,' she said. 'The berserkers used them. The bare shirts.'

Sitting there before him with a towel round her waist but her breasts bare there, he could feel the berserker force rising in him, in his genitals, compelling, demanding, urgent.

'Reindeer love them,' she said. 'If you've taken amanitas you can't go out of the house to have a piss. You have to stay inside and piss in the soup. Otherwise the reindeer gallop at you to drink the piss and knock you over.'

Rolling in the snow there, cooling the heat in his groin, wanting to piss now but unable to because of that sexual pressure.

'That's how they get to fly. With an amanita muscaria sitting on the sled. All red with white flecks.'

And there she was, hot from the shower, steaming, her face and arms and breasts and back and belly flecked red and white, glowing there like an amanita in a birch forest.

'That's what Father Christmas is. A midwinter trip.'

Men in white overalls flecked in red carrying slaughtered mushroom carcasses on their backs into the cold room.

While outside the cicadas trilled and drilled. His whole energy vibrated in rhythm with them, as if he were revving up higher and higher and about to ascend, burst through the crown of his skull, and soar up through the ceiling and the roof and the cloudless sky.

'It was like an assault,' Dorritt said. 'One minute I'd been outside with Rose, in the sun, in nature, it was like being in a Van Gogh painting, the sunflowers were vibrating with solar energy, the trees were swirls of life spiraling up to heaven, the birds were flying along the lines of the sky, you could see the different currents and densities of the air, the waves and swirls and vortexes. Vortices. You could hear it all pulsating along with the crickets and cicadas. Great waves of sound and then silence. The earth breathing. And then suddenly we were inside and everything was dark, the air was viscid, it was like being in an oil well, everything was moving slowly, trapped in this heavy fluid, and they were all shouting at me, all together, what was I doing, who was I working for, what was the survey for, what was I trying to find out?'

'You're sure of this?' Plant asked.

'That's what it seemed like,' said Dorritt.

'All of them shouting at you?'

'That was my first impression,' Dorritt said. 'But that might have been subjective, of course. It had been so peaceful outside. Paradisal. So the contrast might have made it seem worse. And I might be projecting backwards. It was certainly like that later. I think. And I might be imagining it was like that from the beginning. It all merges into one, you see. One endless session. Endless interrogation.'

'What did they want to know?'

'I told you. They kept asking what was I doing? Who was I working for? What was the survey about? I tried to answer. But it was so hard. It was hard even to talk. I just wanted to be within myself. Or within Rose.'

He laughed.

'In consciousness, I mean,' he said. 'We'd been merging our consciousnesses outside. In the meadow. The mushrooms had allowed us to break down the usual barriers. And then suddenly this was happening. And all these other forces were trying to break in.'

'And what did you tell them?'

'I didn't tell them anything,' Dorritt said.

'Why not?'

'It was a secret project.'

'And you'd been told not to reveal it?'

'It was a security matter.'

'And you'd been trained to resist interrogation?'

'Had I?'

'I'm asking you.'

'I don't know,' said Dorritt. 'I just didn't like the way they were bullying me. First one, then the other, then the next, it was a whole battery of questions and I couldn't handle them. Maybe if they'd just asked me one at a time, just one of them,

more gently, it might have been different. But maybe not. They tried that later and it didn't work.'

'Later in the day?'

'No, days later. When they'd locked me up.'

'They locked you up?'

'Oh, yes,' he said. He grinned. 'They incarcerated me. It was quite dramatic. Horrific. Ollie even had handcuffs. "I got handcuffs," he said. "You want to tie him up, I got the gear."'

'He threatened you?'

'He was quite nice about it, actually. He was always smiling. He said some people would get off on it. Like his belt.'

'His belt?'

'He had this studded leather belt. With a great brass buckle. When I was tripping I kept looking at it. It was extraordinary. Alive and brazen. "I know it's cheap trash," he said. "I know it's very Western. As the cashier admitted when I opened my account. But divinely tasteless. Pure kitsch. The Wells Fargo Bank. They gave them out free with your checking account. Do you want me to take it off for you?" I kept seeing all these TV westerns. Wells Fargo, you know. Cowboys and all that. "You have an account with Wells Fargo?" I asked him. "I opened one when I went to college," he said. "And you still keep it?" I said. "Inquisitive little fucker, aren't you," he said.'

Twenty Three

'So you were out of your brain on mushrooms and they asked you questions.'

'They interrogated me,' said Dorritt. 'They didn't just ask me questions, this was an interrogation.'

He sucked at the strands of his moustache with a heavy self-satisfaction.

'So who specifically asked the questions?'

'It was a team.'

'A team?'

'An interrogation team.'

'What, they borrowed one from the Stasi and flew it in?'

'It was never just one person asking, it was always a team of them.'

'Consisting of who?'

'Huxter and Ollie and Angie and Rose,' he said.

'All of them?'

'No,' said Dorritt, 'not altogether. But always two or three.'

'And just random, or were some of them always there?'

'Huxter was usually there.'

'And asking questions?'

Dorritt chewed on his moustache.

'Interrogating?'

'Yes.'

'So it was mainly Huxter.'

'I think there might have been other people I can't remember who were there once or twice. I can't remember. Everyone took part.'

'And Huxter always took part.'

'Probably,' said Dorritt. 'And Ollie.'

'And what did they want to know?'

'Who I was working for, basically.'

'Just that.'

'That's what it always came down to. Who sent me? Who paid me? Who did I report to? Who was the survey for?'

'And do you think they knew?'

'If they knew, why would they keep on asking?'

Plant let the silence hang there a while.

'If they didn't know, why would they think to ask?' he said in the end.

'I see,' said Dorritt, sucking on more of his whiskers. 'Yes, that is interesting. You think they already knew. You think there'd been a leak. Or a tip-off. But then why would they need to ask, if they knew? Just to make sure?'

'They must have been pretty sure if they kept you locked up.'

'I suppose so.'

'They did keep you locked up?'

'Yes,' said Dorritt. 'Yes, they did, it was hell. For days. Weeks. I lost all track of time.' He chewed some more. 'But if they knew, why did they keep me there?'

'So you'd make a confession?' suggested Plant.

'Do you think?'

'Could be. Did you?'

'Did I what?'

'Make a confession.'

Dorritt's hairy face crumpled.

'I don't remember.'

'Fair enough,' said Plant.

'It was awful,' Dorritt said. 'They took me outside. I thought they were going to execute me. I thought they were going to put a hood over my head and tie me to a tree and shoot me. I couldn't see where I was. It was dark and everything was swirling. And the mushrooms. They'd made it so that I didn't know what was

happening. Except that I was terrified. They took me to this shed. They pushed me in, and threw my sleeping bag in after me and locked the door. There wasn't any light. Nothing but rats and snakes and bats and spiders.'

'All of them?'

'All of them,' said Dorritt. 'Toads. Beetles. Lizards. Hornets. Fleas.'

'You get bitten?'

'All over.'

'What by?'

'Everything,' said Dorritt.

'Or it seemed that way,' said Plant.

'It was that way.'

'But you lived to tell the tale.'

'But I went mad, didn't I?'

'You tell me.'

'I went mad. Don't you believe me?'

'I believe you,' said Plant.

'I should be getting back,' said Dorritt. 'I've been talking for hours.'

'It's not that late,' said Plant. 'We had dinner early.'

'I suppose we did,' said Dorritt.

Now that he'd found him, Plant didn't want to let him go again. Maybe if he got him stoned.

'Sure you don't want a smoke?'

'Quite sure.'

'A beer?'

'No.'

'Tea? Coffee?'

'A herbal tea, maybe.'

'Sure,' said Plant.

He went inside the cabin and boiled some water. There was instant coffee or tea bags. No herbal tea. Maybe he could put

some grass in the teapot and splash boiling water on it. The herb, man. Toss some sugar in.

Should he put Dorritt up on the couch? He didn't trust him not to disappear again. He didn't trust him sleeping in the same cabin, either. What if he was as crazy as he claimed? He didn't fancy sitting up all night for fear of being strangled in his sleep. He'd drop off in the end. Inevitably. And if Dorritt didn't murder him, he'd probably creep off at crack of dawn and vanish anyway. Tie him up? Lock him in the bathroom? He went back out with the noxious brew.

'It'll need to sit a bit,' he said.

Dorritt nodded.

'So what about the torture?' he asked.

Dorritt grinned.

'And sex slavery?'

He leered.

'I'll tell you next time. I'm nearly finished writing that part.'

He poured himself a cup of tea.

That'll wipe the smile from his whiskers, Plant reflected.

It didn't.

'I really must get back,' Dorritt said when he'd drunk it.

'I'll drive you.'

'I can walk.'

'No you can't.'

'It's not far.'

'Yes it is,' said Plant.

He needed to see where Dorritt was staying. Watch him go in there.

It was a backpackers' place. He might have guessed.

'I thought there might be lots of Swedish girl hikers,' Dorritt explained.

'And are there?'

'I haven't seen them.'

'How about breakfast tomorrow?' said Plant.

'They don't do breakfast here.'

'I know a good place,' said Plant. 'I'll shout you. I'll pick you up.'

'As early as you like,' said Dorritt. 'I'm an early riser.'

'I guessed you would be,' said Plant.

Back at the beach resort he phoned up Huxter from reception. He left a message on the voice mail saying where he was and that he'd found Dorritt at Byron Bay and he'd begun an extensive interview with him. Then he went back to his cabin and carefully poured out the water from what was left of Dorritt's herbal tea and scooped out the leaves of grass from the teapot. He put them on a saucer to dry out. It should be all right. THC wasn't water-soluble. No point in wasting good stuff.

Twenty Four

Plant picked up Dorritt at the backpackers' hostel. It was awash with Euro-trash. Hung-over, shaven-headed, pallid young Englishmen milled around, stumbling into hung-over, shaven-headed, pallid young Frenchmen. The air was thick with shit and merde and the occasional scheiss. There was no sign of any Swedish girls. They must have still been beating each other with birch twigs in the showers.

Dorritt lurched through, blinking above his happy hairy smile.

'It's become so cosmopolitan,' he said.

'Everything changes,' said Plant. 'Things fall apart.'

'Where are you taking me?' Dorritt asked.

'There's a beach cafe,' said Plant. 'They do a good breakfast. And it's in the open.'

'It won't be windy?'

'I thought you might still be worried about bugs.'

'I've got this,' said Dorritt, producing a roll-on insect repellent.

'Good thinking,' said Plant.

They sat overlooking the beach. It took a wide sweep, the Bay, the Belongil, Brunswick Heads and beyond, fifty kilometers of splendour. Out at sea the Julian Rocks offered a point of focus. Dorritt took it.

'Ancient igneous rock,' he said, 'from a volcanic eruption twenty million years ago. Can you imagine?'

'Not really,' said Plant.

'Named by Captain Cook in 1776.'

'Is that so?'

'They provide shelter for over five hundred species of fish.'

'How do you know all this?' Plant asked.

'I read a travel guide I picked up,' said Dorritt. 'I still pick things like that up. It comes from being a bibliographer.'

'It's possible,' said Plant.

'Fancy being marooned there,' Dorritt continued. 'No shade. No water. Can you imagine?'

'Not really,' said Plant.

'And surrounded by sharks,' he continued. 'The sharks have attacked divers here. It used to be a whaling station and they threw the whale meat they didn't use back into the sea. The sharks still remember the smell of blood. They come back to it.'

'Eat your hotcakes,' said Plant, 'before they get cold.'

Dorritt obeyed, his glasses sparkling in the morning sun.

'You know what I like about Byron Bay?' he asked, in between and through mouthfuls of hotcakes.

'Tell me,' said Plant.

The sun, the sea, the surf, the promise of sex and drugs, endless summer, eternal youth.

'The way all the old streets are named after poets.'

Plant nodded.

'Jonson Street, Lawson Street, Marvell Street, Milton Street...'

'Yeah, yeah,' said Plant. 'I get it.'

'It makes it so...'

He tailed off, brow furrowed with concentration.

'Literary?' suggested Plant.

'Yes, so literary.'

'You want me to tell you about the torture?' said Dorritt. 'The incarceration. That was probably the worst part. Being locked up. That was torture in itself. That old shed. Timber and iron. I didn't know where I was. I'd never even seen it. It must have been

some way from the house. There were trees around it. I know that because branches would crash down on the roof in the middle of the night. It was terrifying. Absolutely terrifying.'

He looked at his ice cream reflectively. Like he knew it was made from slaughtered pigs. He bit into it, coating the fringe of his moustache and beard.

'They frog-marched me there. Literally. It's an interesting word, don't you think? I wonder why frog. I must look it up. But that's what they did. One on each side of me. They opened the door and threw in my sleeping bag and my rucksack. We didn't call them backpacks in those days. I wonder why that's changed. Americanisation, I expect. Then they pushed me in and padlocked the door. There was no light. The windows were covered with corrugated iron. No glass. The floor was just dirt, no boards or anything. I was terrified of spiders and things. But that wasn't the worst.'

He looked across at the Julian Rocks, as if imagining whether being marooned there would have been worse.

In the end Plant took the cue.

'What was the worst?'

Dorritt held it for a while, his mouth fractionally open, delaying.

'Snakes,' he said.

Plant felt himself shuddering. Give Dorritt his due, he could do it well. The timing. The sibilance.

'Snakes,' he repeated.

He picked up his cappuccino, adding to the scum around his whiskers.

'Later I discovered farmers deliberately kept them in their sheds. To eat the rats.'

'But they didn't eat you,' said Plant.

'The rats or the snakes?' asked Dorritt.

'Either.'

'They're not dangerous,' said Dorritt. 'Not carpet snakes. But I didn't know that at the time, did I?'

'Didn't you?'

'No, I didn't.'

He went back to his breakfast.

'It was terrifying. Hearing this thing slithering in the roof. Seeing it move. Inching along. I thought I was going to be crushed to death. My breath squeezed out of me. My ribs caved in. I stayed right in the middle of the floor. I thought that way I might be safe. I knew they had to have their tail anchored round something before they could constrict their muscles enough to crush you.'

'That's boa-constrictors,' said Plant.

'I know,' said Dorritt. 'But I didn't know what this was. Not till Rose came in. She comforted me. But it was still terrifying. I was terrified to go to sleep. With the rats as well.'

'Wouldn't the snake have eaten the rats?' asked Plant.

'Eventually, probably,' said Dorritt. 'But the rats could still gnaw your toes when you were asleep. I kept my shoes on. And tried to stay awake.'

'With Rose?'

He didn't answer.

'I have this recurrent dream. Still. A nightmare. It's terrible.'

Plant groaned. Inwardly, but it was still a groan. The one thing he could do without was being told people's dreams. Over breakfast. Especially terrible dreams. If he'd wanted to be an analyst he would have been born a Viennese. Or gotten Americanised.

'I dream this snake is in my bed with me. Wrapped round me. Squeezing out my breath. Choking me.'

A couple of bush turkeys came out of the scrub and pecked around the tables, their bald-looking heads and bright red and yellow wattles bobbing up and down as they scavenged for

crumbs and scraps. Dorritt seemed not to see them. He was back in the shed, struggling awake from his dream.

'Then they came and interrogated me.'

'When was that?'

'I lost all track of time.'

'Straight away? Or the next day?'

'Day after day,' said Dorritt. 'Day after day they'd come in, Huxter and Ollie and Angela and Rose.'

'What, all of them?'

'All of them. I think there were other people too.'

'All at the same time?'

'Yes,' said Dorritt. 'Well sometimes maybe one or two of them were off doing something else. Washing. Cooking. Cleaning. I don't know. But it was always two or three of them at least.'

'And they all asked questions?'

'I think so. Huxter asked the most. But the others did too. Huxter was quite aggressive. But Rose was friendly. Considerate. She'd bring me things. But Huxter never did.'

'What sort of things?'

'Oh, mangoes, peaches, a joint.'

'Gifts of love.'

'That too,' he said.

'And Angela?'

'Cigarettes mainly.'

'And gifts of love?'

'Sometimes.'

'And did she ask questions?'

Dorritt pondered.

'I think I'd like another coffee,' he said, looking round to hail service.

'You have to go and order it,' Plant said. 'I'll get you one.'

'A cappuccino,' said Dorritt.

'Did Angela ask questions?'

'Not many. Not that I can remember. It was mainly Huxter. And Ollie. Maybe Angela said something once in a while. And Rose even. I can't remember. What I remember was Huxter.'

He held his head in his hands.

'I'll order that coffee,' said Plant.

Twenty Five

'You said you were drugged,' said Plant.

'Did I?'

'Were you?'

'I suppose so,' said Dorritt. 'They're quite amazing, those mushrooms. They can be horrific. But they can be marvellous. Cosmic. You see the divine in everything.'

'In everything?'

'Yes.'

'Even in Huxter?'

'He has his place in the scheme of things,' said Dorritt. 'Everyone does. We all have our place in the grand design.'

'That's reassuring,' said Plant.

'It is,' said Dorritt. 'They are. Mushrooms are very reassuring. Ultimately.'

'So you asked for more.'

'I don't know that I asked for them. But Rose brought me some. She said the mushroom season was really very brief. It was nearly over. We should take them while we could.'

'So you did.'

'I suppose so,' he said. 'It's very hard to remember. You get flashbacks, you know. Suddenly you're in this mushroom state even though you haven't taken any that day. And sometimes they have no effect. If you've taken them one day they don't have much effect the next day. So it's hard to tell.'

'And Rose gave them to you. Not Huxter.'

'Huxter never gave me anything,' said Dorritt. 'He was very mean. You could see that when you'd taken mushrooms.'

'You can see it without mushrooms,' said Plant.

'Can you?'

'With him, yes.'

'You must be quite perceptive,' said Dorritt. 'Looks can be deceiving.'

'Thank you,' said Plant.

'I was thinking particularly of Huxter. I wouldn't have realised unless I'd taken mushrooms.'

'And they asked you questions while you were tripping?'

'Any time,' said Dorritt. 'Much like you.'

He smiled.

'Nice coffee,' he said. 'Thank you.'

'What sort of questions?'

'That must be the ultimate question,' said Dorritt. 'The question to end all questions. The question about questions themselves.'

'So give me the ultimate answer,' said Plant.

'Of course,' said Dorritt.

He did some more business with the coffee and the spoon and the packets of paper-wrapped sugar.

'I'm sure I've already told you. They wanted to know what I was doing. Was the survey my own idea? Or did someone hire me to do it? Did I apply for funding or was it given me? Who funded it? Who was I working for?'

'Did you tell them?'

'I imagine so,' said Dorritt. 'In the end. Psilocybin is like LSD. The security agencies use it with amytol as a truth drug.'

'Did they give you amytol?'

'Oh yes,' said Dorritt. 'Angela gave me some of her sleeping pills when I couldn't sleep. They were sodium amytol.'

'So you spilled it all.'

'I expect so. I know when I saw Professor Oates afterwards, he said the project was finished. So they must have shut it down.'

'Because you'd talked.'

'I imagine anyone would talk in those circumstances and with those drugs,' said Dorritt. 'I don't feel bad about it. Not

now. I did at the time. When I had my breakdown. I felt quite guilty then. Sometimes. But I felt all sorts of things then. I went quite mad. So I don't put much credence on what I felt then. And anyway, there wasn't much to feel guilty about. I'd got to the end of the project. There might have been one or two loose ends. But basically it was all done. I'd written it all up except for the rest of the *Rites* details before I went up there. It was going to be a holiday, going up to Byron. A free holiday. You know, on expenses.'

He looked at Plant, knowingly.

'But I guess there's no such thing as a free holiday, is there?'

'I had an out of body experience,' Dorritt said, enthusiastically. 'It was quite interesting. I was up in the sky. Like a spotter plane. Or a U2. Or a satellite. Looking down at the farm. I could see the house. The verandahs round it. The mown lawns. And the shed. And I knew I was inside there. Inside my sleeping bag. Curled up. Foetal position and everything. Sucking my thumb. I could see every detail. But I was also up above it all. Looking down. At dawn. It happened at dawn. I don't know whether it was the drugs. Or the fear. Or if I was already going mad. But it wasn't frightening. Not like the snake dream. In fact, I quite enjoyed it. I wouldn't mind doing it again, sometime.'

'Tell me about the sex slavery,' said Plant.

'Sex slavery!' said Dorritt. He repeated it. Loudly. 'Sex slavery!!'

The family group at the next table looked across, the parents in alarm, the children in expectation. The waiter grinned, like she'd be in that, cool.

'I think this has been enough for one day,' said Dorritt.

'You put it in that piece you wrote.'

'In the Writers' Centre magazine, yes,' said Dorritt. 'I mentioned it. But I haven't written it up yet. I'm keeping it till last.'

'It happened?'

'Oh, it happened.'

'And who were the slaves?'

'Oh, I was,' said Dorritt.

'You were.'

'Oh yes,' said Dorritt. 'No doubt about that.'

'Was it fun?'

'Fun?' He pondered. 'At the time it might have seemed that way. If it hadn't all been so traumatic. But you can't ignore the element of abuse. That's one thing I learned from counselling.'

The waiter came by, hovered beside them like a surveillance helicopter.

'Anything else?' she asked.

'I don't think so,' said Dorritt.

'Another coffee?' suggested Plant.

'No,' said Dorritt.

'For you?' she said to Plant.

'I should be going,' said Dorritt.

'No thanks,' said Plant, 'but thank you.'

'You're welcome.'

She gave a suggestive grin. At least, Plant found it suggestive. He responded in kind and she disappeared rapidly. Dorritt stood up.

'I have to be careful,' he said. 'It was all so traumatic. I don't want to bring on another attack. If I talk too much about it, if I stir it up too much, that could happen. You understand.'

'Yes,' said Plant. He understood. He understood he was being strung along.

'That's why I've been writing it all down. To come to terms with it calmly.'

'Sounds like a good idea,' said Plant. 'I'll take you back so you can write down some more.'

'Thank you,' said Dorritt. He grinned. 'It's all the sex stuff next.'

'Good,' said Plant. 'I look forward to it.'

Twenty Six

Plant sat in the soft evening on his verandah. The goannas rustled in the undergrowth. Birds sang. Insects buzzed. He smoked a couple of joints, put the dope and the roaches safely out of sight, and settled down with *Last Rites.* It was a contentment too good to endure. He knew that, even as he experienced it. Its transitoriness was what gave it its poignant note, the fragility of satisfaction. His perception of the immanence of all nature contained within it the sense of imminent disruption. He was not at all surprised when out of the foliage, breaking through the bushes, emerged the sweaty forms of Ghostly Sperrit and Angela Dark.

'What brings you two beautiful people up here?' Plant asked.

'This is where the beautiful people come, darling,' said Angela.

Her make-up was thick, caked, but didn't obliterate the lines round her eyes and mouth. Nor did the lipstick on the teeth help. Sperrit's shirt was dishevelled as usual, one of the tails hanging out over the waistband like an atrophied additional member. His collar was loose and his tie knotted way down below his neck, as if he had escaped from a lynch mob. Angela slumped into the spare chair and kicked off her shoes. Sperrit walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge.

'A beer all right?' he called out.

'Gin,' said Angela.

'Beer's all there is,' said Sperrit.

'A beer then,' she said. 'And quick.'

He brought out a couple of cans.

It wasn't lack of consideration that Sperrit didn't bring him one, Plant knew.

There were only two left in the fridge.

Sperrit popped the top and took a long, gurgling swig.

Plant waited. Sperrit drank. Angela took a lady journalist's sip for a couple of minutes. Then the silence got to her as Plant knew it would. Out in the silent sticks. She broke it.

'Sperrit's ghost-writing his memoirs and I'm helping him,' she said.

'Can't he write them himself?'

'He says it's difficult to write the truth about himself.'

'Why bother? He never wrote the truth about anybody else,' said Plant.

Sperrit burped.

'So why start now?' Plant persisted.

Sperrit took another swig and burped again.

'What prompted this? Dorritt give him the idea?'

Nobody answered.

'So you found our defector,' said Sperrit.

'Defector?'

'The defective defector. The spook who got spooked.'

'Yes, I know who you mean.'

'That's something,' said Sperrit.

'I just hadn't thought of him in those terms.'

'Went over to the enemy,' said Sperrit.

'Which enemy?' asked Plant. This time he really didn't know. 'You mean Huxter?'

'Why would I mean Huxter?'

'When Dorritt cracked,' said Plant. 'Revealing all. Offering the crown jewels to the national press.'

'Crown jewels?' said Sperrit. His turn to be lost or to simulate loss.

'Spilling all he knew,' said Plant. 'About it being a secret service operation.'

'Huxter's sound,' said Sperrit. 'Sound enough. He would never publish it. But now your little traitor's threatening to put it on the web. That's over the top. Going public.'

'The public's the enemy?' asked Plant. 'Dorritt's a traitor?'

'Some things are not to be disclosed.'

'You reckon?'

'You don't?'

'I think it might be too late,' said Plant. 'He's already disclosed most of them.'

'Bad show,' said Sperrit.

Plant felt a glacial chill. It reminded him of something horrible. Something deeply repressed. Those cold tones. The bloodless certitude of right. Utter unfeeling rectitude. His headmaster. So long ago and still frozen there beneath the layers. He'd never thought of Sperrit as headmaster material before. A Grub Street hack. A political lackey. Even a gutter rat or a sewer rat. Capable of gnawing the toes off corpses. But never a headmaster. Till now.

'Not playing the game,' said Plant.

'Not at all,' said Sperrit. He sucked at his beer can like a spectator at a rugby game. Plant's beer. He burped, the man of the people again, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, wiping away the unfortunate impression he'd made on Plant. Except that it hung there, impaled on its meat-hook.

'So you found him.'

'Yes.'

'How did you manage that?'

'Tradecraft,' said Plant.

'Pull the other one,' said Sperrit.

'I was eating a pizza and he walked in.'

'Into the pizza?'

Plant nodded. 'We shared it.'

'Touching scene,' said Sperrit.

'Thank you,' said Plant.

Sperrit waved acknowledgment.

'Where is he now?'

'No idea,' said Plant. 'Probably eating another pizza.'

'Where's he staying?'

'Some backpackers' place.'

'Which one?'

'You got a reason to ask or is that just idle curiosity?'

'You better believe I've got a reason,' said Sperrit.

'You have authorisation?

'Authorisation? What is this?'

'As I understand it, it's a confidential inquiry.'

'So who do you think you're inquiring for?'

'As I understand it, Huxter.'

'Good. So where's he staying?'

'That's something I'll report back to Huxter.'

Sperrit turned to Angela.

'Who is this joker?'

She already had her mobile phone out of her handbag.

'I'll call Huxter,' she said.

She must have had his straight through number.

'Plant needs to know if it's OK to tell Ghostly where our missing friend's staying.'

She handed the phone to Plant.

'You some kind of maniac?' said Huxter.

'Just following procedure,' said Plant.

'Just tell him and stop farting around.'

Plant told him.

'Where's the pizza place? Or is that confidential?' Sperrit asked.

Plant told him that, too. On a need to know basis. Even Sperrit might need to eat.

'Any good?'

'Yes.'

Sperrit shook the last drops of beer down his throat and crushed the can in his hand.

'See youse,' he said, lumbering off, tossing the can over the verandah rail.

'Where're you off to?' asked Angela.

'See a man about a dog,' he said. 'Plant'll take you to dinner. He likes to share a pizza.'

'Sure,' said Plant, retrieving the can from the bush and taking it inside to the trash bin.

'Well, since you asked so nicely,' said Angela, 'I'd love to.'

Twenty Seven

'Dorritt tells me you all had quite a party up here,' said Plant.

'He tells you that, does he?'

'Fascinating stuff,' said Plant.

'What else does he tell you?'

'Oh, this and that. How you moved on from running an alternative paper to drugging visitors, incarcerating them and torturing them. We get onto to the details of the sex-slavery tomorrow.'

'Should brighten your day,' she said.

'So how did it all happen?'

'Shit happens,' she said.

'Maybe you should tell me your side of the story.'

'My side of the story? What is this, some kind of …?'

'Investigation, yes.'

'Dorritt's the one you're supposed to be investigating.'

'Oh, and I am,' said Plant. 'And if you want to leave it so I've only got his word against yours, and you'd prefer to remain silent, feel free.'

'You got another beer?'

''Fraid not.'

She lit a cigarette.

'Things got out of hand,' she said.

'I gathered that.'

'That's about it,' she said.

'How did they get out of hand?'

'Things do,' she said.

'So what started it all off?' said Plant. 'Maybe you'd better tell me.'

'There was a council of war,' Angela said.

'Is that what they called it?'

'It's what I called it,' said Angela. Incontrovertibly.

Plant accepted it. It was going to be a matter of accepting it or getting nowhere.

'Why?' he asked.

'Why not? What else would you call it?'

'I mean why did you have it?'

'We were just sitting round the table,' she said. 'And we were talking about Dorritt.'

'He was at the table too?'

'No.'

'Where was he? In the shed?'

She drew on the cigarette, puffed the smoke at him.

'You're a nightmare to try and talk to,' she said.

Plant nodded agreement.

'I don't know. Rose had probably taken him off mushrooming.'

'Mushrooming?'

'It's best in the early morning. Apparently.'

'So this was early morning?'

'Must have been,' she said. 'If that's where they were. We were just sitting around. We did a lot of sitting around in those days.' She blew more smoke in his direction. 'Still do.'

'And what happened?'

'We were talking about Dorritt. Or someone was. He wasn't exactly a hot, exciting topic. But someone said something about him and someone else said he was a blight and someone else said he was an intrusion and someone else said...'

'Do these someones have names?' Plant asked.

More smoke.

'Well, I was there and Ollie and Huxter and Sperrit would have been floating around.'

'Sperrit? Was he on the paper?'

'Not exactly,' she said vaguely. A studied vagueness, it seemed to Plant.

'Did he write for it?'

'He looked in from time to time,' she said. No more precisely.

'I never saw his byline.'

'You've seen the paper?'

'Sure have.'

'You ever see the last issue?'

Plant pointed to it beneath his chair.

'Made a point of it.'

'He's on the cover.'

'I don't remember him.'

'That's because you only have eyes for the girls.'

'Could be.'

'He's the headless man. Our Douglas Fairbanks Jr. And Rose was our Duchess of Argyle.'

Plant studied it again. The head buried in Rose's bush. The hand cupping Rose's breast.

'So Sperrit was there.'

'If there's where you mean by there.'

'I hadn't realised.'

'Well, you wouldn't, would you?'

'Why's that?'

'Half the time people don't realise Ghostly's there. Till they wake up in bed with him in the morning. Why do you think he's called Ghostly?'

'You could hardly call him Holy.'

'Go on.'

'A euphemism for Ghastly?'

'Good try. But no.'

'Because he's a ghost-writer. Writing politician's speeches and all that. Memoirs.'

She laughed. Her tinkling, Tinker Bell laugh. The laugh to cut across the copy room and set a chill in everyone's vitals.

'Imaginative,' she said. 'Creative.'

'Like Sperrit.'

'He's not that creative,' she said. 'Except for his endless byblows.'

'Really?'

'A waste of Sperrit in an expense of shame,' she said. 'No, he was called Ghostly way before he embarked on his brilliant career.'

'So tell me.'

'We called him Ghostly because he was always flitting around in the background.'

'Doing what?'

'Ah, if we knew that,' she said, 'we might know everything. Doing his master's business, I suppose.'

'And who's his master?'

'And if we knew that we'd know more than enough. If we knew that we'd know more than we need to know.'

'Might be interesting,' said Plant.

'Might never live to tell the tale,' she said.

'Is that a warning? It's like that, is it?' said Plant. Too quickly.

'Like what?'

'National security.'

'I wouldn't know,' she said.

'Wouldn't? Or prefer not to?'

'What do you think?'

'I'm asking you.'

'I know,' she said. 'And I'm not answering.'

'So Ghostly as in Spooky.'

She shrugged.

'I didn't say that.'

'I did,' said Plant.

'I wouldn't, if I were you,' she said.

Plant gave a smile. It felt chill, even to him.

'Anyway, back to the council of war,' he said. 'There was you and Huxter and Ollie and Sperrit.'

'And Rose.'

'I thought you said she'd taken Dorritt mushrooming.'

'Did I?'

'Did she?'

'Maybe that was some other time.'

'So where was Dorritt?'

'Out mowing the grass.'

'Mowing the grass.'

'The grass needed to be kept down round the house. Because of the snakes. So we gave him a job. He was deliriously happy to be needed. He'd been bugging people, you know, following them around and snuffling away. Trying to ingratiate himself. Asking what could he do to help. So we got him mowing the lawns. Which got him out of the house but he still kept on looking in through the windows. And somebody said, "What's with that guy?" And we got to talking about him. Speculating about where he was at. And somebody must have said they didn't like the way he was snooping around.'

'Who said?'

'Probably Huxter. Or Ollie. Or Sperrit.'

'One of the boys.'

'It's a boys' fantasy,' said Angela.

'Which of the boys in particular?'

'Any of them. They got off on paranoia. They liked to think they were doing something wicked. Annoying their father figures. So they had to imagine they were under surveillance, otherwise they weren't being effective. It made them feel important. Gave a meaning to their lives.'

Twenty Eight

The cool dark room. The radio on in the background. Sperrit always had the radio on in the background. In case there were any bugs. The bowls of fruit. The dope. The slow circling suspicion.

'Why's he writing all this stuff down?' Huxter asked. 'Does anybody believe what he says?'

'I don't understand what he says,' said Ollie.

'He claims it's a survey of the alternative press,' said Angela.

'So who would want a survey like that?' Huxter asked

'It's an interesting area,' said Ollie.

'To whom?'

'To you, to me,' said Ollie.

'To the government,' said Huxter.

'It's hard to imagine,' said Angela.

'To security,' said Huxter.

Angela laughed. 'You really think they care? You think they read? You think we're so important?'

'Yes,' said Huxter.

'You're joking.'

'We're alternative. We're oppositional,' said Huxter. 'We're against censorship, we're against the war, of course we're important.'

'I'd never have guessed.'

'So now you know,' said Ollie.

'You can't just go around saying he's a spook,' said Angela.

'Why not?'

'Well, where's the evidence?'

'That's what we're going to find.'

'You've already decided even before you find any,' said Angela. 'You start saying it and you end up believing it without any justification. It just serves to divide the whole movement.'

'Like people say Ollie's CIA,' said Rose, 'just because he's an American.'

'All Americans abroad are CIA,' said Ollie.

'Really?' said Rose.

'Unless we're NSA, DEA, Naval Intelligence, Secret Service, or IRS. It's what makes us so sexy.'

'Is that so?'

'Everyone loves a spook,' said Ollie.

'Screw a spook for peace,' said Rose.

'Exactly.'

'So what are you going to do about it?' Angela asked.

'Anyone want a screw?' asked Ollie.

'We should ask him who's funding him,' said Huxter.

'Good thinking,' said Ollie. 'Then we could apply to them and pay for another issue.'

'I'm serious,' said Huxter.

'And I'm not?' said Ollie.

'If you're serious that he's serious, he isn't going to tell us, is he?' said Sperrit. 'Not just like that.'

'Like what?'

'Without persuasion,' said Sperrit.

'He might,' said Huxter.

'No way,' said Sperrit.

'You might have to twist his arm a bit,' said Ollie. 'Give him a Chinese burn.'

'I could ask him,' said Rose.

Huxter snorted.

'You may snort,' said Rose. 'But I could get him stoned.'

'Spare us,' said Huxter.

'Feed him mushrooms,' said Ollie.

'And what do we do then?' asked Sperrit.

'Get a confession,' said Rose.

'And then what do we do?'

'Tell him he's a naughty boy,' said Angela.

'Exactly,' said Sperrit.

'Publish his photograph as a warning,' said Ollie. 'It would make a good story for the next *Rites*.'

'They'd love that,' said Huxter.

'Is that a yes or a no?' Ollie asked.

'He could be all right,' said Rose.

'Pigs might fly,' said Huxter. 'The drug squad sprouts wings.'

'Why do you think he's drug squad?'

'All those people he told us who gave him dope.'

'You asked him,' said Rose.

'And he told us. Names, addresses, rank, serial number.'

'Well, if he was drug squad he wouldn't tell you.'

'Why wouldn't he?'

'If that was the information he was after, he wouldn't pass it on.'

'Why not? They pass on the drugs they seize.'

'Not for free,' said Rose. 'They resell them.'

'What's it matter?' said Huxter. 'If he's not drug squad he's special branch and if he's not special branch he's ASIO. He's dangerous. He asks too many questions. He has to be something.'

'He said he'd like to write a whole chapter about us,' said Rose.

'About us?'

'About the paper.'

'Or about us?'

'What's the difference?' asked Rose.

'And you want him to write a whole chapter?'

'I think it would be nice.'

'Nice?'

'Yes. Nice.'

'Steal his notebook and see how nice it is,' said Sperrit. 'Keep him busy out there and I'll go through it.'

'And if there's anything worth stealing you'll write it up for the national press,' said Ollie. 'Under one of your many pseudonyms.'

'This is serious,' said Huxter. He was getting annoyed, his mouth set tight, his nose taut, white, bloodless. Some people got red and flushed when they were angry. Huxter went white and cold.

'So we keep an eye on him,' said Ollie.

'I've been keeping an eye on him,' said Huxter. 'And I don't like what I see.'

Twenty Nine

'But there again,' said Angela, 'that really could have applied to pretty well most things. Huxter has never looked at the world with love and approbation.'

'I don't find him especially warm,' Plant agreed.

'Nothing personal, darling. That's just the way he is. Not immediately lovable.'

'How did you all manage to get along with each other?'

'I'm not sure we always did.'

'Sperrit's not exactly full of old-world charm, either.'

'No,' she agreed. 'I think Ollie found him a bit much.'

'In what way.'

'Perhaps a trifle too Australian hetero for American taste. Sperrit would screw anything dead or alive, as long as it was vaguely female, or he could gouge a hole in it. Just a shallow one.'

'And Huxter?'

'Who knows what Huxter is,' she said, shaking her head. 'But Ollie was always hopeful. He figured Huxter could go either way.'

'And did he?'

'How would I know?'

Plant just looked at her. She laughed.

'Secrets of the confessional, darling,' she said. 'But I think you'd be reasonably safe alone in a dark alley with him. And your girlfriend. If you have a girlfriend.'

Plant continued looking.

'Power, darling. Power is what Huxter gets off on.'

'That's how you two get along, is it?'

'Of course. You didn't think I'd settle for a quick bonk in the lift after lunch, did you? Need someone a shade more physical for that.'

She smiled at Plant.

'And quite a bit younger, too. You're quite safe.'

'There aren't many lifts in Byron,' said Plant.

'It doesn't have to be a lift, darling. Don't be so boringly literal. Any confined space would do. Has done, anyway. Something to hold you up so you don't slip down. After those long liquid lunches.'

She sighed and lit another cigarette. In the distance the surf pounded, filling the night air with the roar of its power. They listened to it. Almost entranced.

'Tell me about the interrogation,' said Plant.

'There wasn't any interrogation, darling,' said Angela. 'Nothing remotely like it.'

'So what was it?'

'Nothing at all, sweetheart. We were just sitting round the table.'

'Having another council of war.'

'Not at all. Smoking the pipe of peace, I expect, if you want to be specific.'

'I do,' said Plant.

'Do what?'

'Want to be specific.'

'Oh, silly me, I thought you were rehearsing marriage vows. Well, to be specific, it probably wasn't a pipe, it was more likely we were passing round a joint. Or two.'

'But it was a meeting.'

'Darling, every encounter is a meeting. Breakfast was a meeting if you want to see it like that. We were just sitting round the table. Or I was. Keeping up the caffeine level. Rolling a smoke because it was there. That's where we sat. At the table.

You know, the radio burbling on, the bowl of dope, the bowl of fruit, the...'

'I know,' said Plant.

'Well, you did ask me to be specific,' she said.

'Not about the furnishings.'

'Suit yourself,' she said. 'We'll ignore the handcuffs and the cattle prod and the electrodes and move on to the conversation.'

Plant looked at her, levelly.

She laughed.

Plant didn't.

'You'll burst, darling,' she said. 'You're dying to ask was there really a cattle prod. And did Ollie really attach to electrodes to Dorritt's genitals. But you're terrified it might be a joke, and you'll look uncool. Talk about interrogation. Who's doing the interrogating?'

'I am,' said Plant.

'On whose behalf?'

'Your boss.'

'My boss? Who would that be, darling?'

'Huxter.'

'Huxter? He's not my boss, darling. He's just a humble arts editor. And I, I am a senior writer.'

'Huxter, anyway,' he said, 'boss or not.'

'Not,' she said. 'Let's get some things clear.'

'Let's,' said Plant.

They faced each other coolly.

'You were sitting round the table.'

'Well, I was sitting at the table, darling. I don't think one person can sit round a table. Unless they're absolutely out of it. Which, of course, sometimes I was.'

'And who joined you?'

'Ah,' she said. 'It really is an awfully long time ago. But I expect Huxter and Ollie were there. At some point. And probably Sperrit. And then Rose came in with Dorritt.'

'Tripping.'

'The light fantastic, absolutely,' said Angela. 'Rose would have been all wreathed in love and light and smiles and sensuality. As always. Chubby little tart that she was.'

'And Dorritt?'

'His usual self,' she said. 'All over the place. Giggles one minute, anguished grimaces the next. Or vice versa.'

'And you started interrogating him?'

'Come on,' she said. 'We were just sitting round the table talking. Somebody probably said something to Dorritt out of politeness.'

'Politeness?' said Plant. 'Huxter? Sperrit?'

'Maybe Ollie,' she said. 'He liked to put people at their ease. Lithe young men, anyway.'

'And did he?'

'Did he what?'

'Put Dorritt at his ease.'

'Dorritt was pretty much off his face,' said Angela. 'I mean, we didn't know at first. We just thought they'd been out tippy-toeing through the daisies, dabbling their toes in the maidenhair fern. Or whatever. She was quite voracious, Rose.'

'But they hadn't?'

'Oh, they probably had. But it sort of became clear they were tripping.'

'And that's when the questions started?'

'When?'

'When it was clear he'd been given mushrooms.'

'You make it sound like they were some sort of truth drug.'

'They are. Psilocybin. The CIA did a lot of research on them.'

'Well, fancy that.'

'Yes, fancy that.'

'Are you implying we knew that?'

Plant sat there, impassive mode.

'That this was done deliberately?'

'It could be done in all sorts of ways,' said Plant. 'It wouldn't take too much imagination to imagine that Rose would take him off tripping.'

'That's true.'

'Good,' said Plant. 'I'm glad something is. So who was asking the questions?'

'I suppose we all were in the end,' she said. 'It didn't seem like that. Like it was deliberate. We were just sitting around talking. And Rose and Dorritt came in. And somehow someone asked him about his survey. Like just to include him in the conversation. After all, what else could you ask him about?'

'And you always made a point of that?'

'Of what?'

'Of including Dorritt in the conversation.'

She shrugged.

'Huxter,' he said. 'Huxter liked to make Dorritt feel at home? Like he always does. With everybody.'

'Yes, well,' she said, 'Huxter isn't exactly a put you at your ease type, I agree.'

'But he was asking Dorritt ease-putting-at questions? Involving him in the general chat?'

'I suppose he was.'

'And how did Dorritt react? Did he slip easily into the relaxed ambience?'

'He was pretty incoherent. Pretty much out of control. We let him sit there for a while, but he was right into the mushrooms. He wasn't really safe to be left alone. He didn't know where he was. Off in space. You could ask him questions but then he'd be away on some other planet. He was a bit of a worry.'

'So you locked him in the barn.'

'We were overcrowded. He'd just lobbed in. We didn't have a spare room. He'd started out sleeping on the verandah but that meant he was lying outside someone's bedroom window

all night. That was too creepy. Especially when he was tripping out of his skull. Voyeurs are one thing. I don't mind a bit of exhibitionism.'

'I believe you,' said Plant.

'But it was too much having him squatting outside like the Jew on the windowsill. So since there was no room at the inn, we put him in the manger.'

'And tied him to it?'

'I don't recall him being tied to anything.'

'Tell me about the barn.'

'The shed. It was fine.'

'Windows?'

'It didn't have windows, it was a shed. Not glazed windows. There was a window frame that was covered with a length of corrugated iron. Same as the door. It wasn't on hinges. It was another length of corrugated iron that was put across the entrance. It wasn't that he was locked up so much as this was how the place was kept shut. If you didn't shut it up at night all sorts of things would get in. The rain and the wind.'

'But things did get in.'

'Like what?'

'Mosquitoes.'

'Probably. Probably a few mosquitoes.'

'Bats. Snakes. Rats.'

'Could've.'

'And that's where you imprisoned him.'

'Imprisoned him?' said Angela. 'No way, absolutely not. We shut him up for his own good.'

'Shut him up for his own good.'

'He was tripping. We couldn't leave him in his sleeping bag on the verandah. Who knows what he might have done to himself. He might have wandered off anywhere. He might have gone off naked into the bush and got bitten by a snake. Drowned himself in the creek.'

'So you locked him up.'

'What would you have done?'

'There wasn't a spare bed?'

'No, there wasn't a spare bed. And no I wasn't going to share my bed with him. You think we should have put him in bed with Sperrit? Or Ollie? You think that would have been a better idea? You think we should have left him on the living-room floor and had him wandering around all night waking everyone up?'

'So you wouldn't describe it as kidnapping?'

'No, darling, I wouldn't. If anyone's been kidnapped it's me. Abandoned by Sperrit and starving to death here.'

'I'll take you to dinner,' said Plant.

'About bloody time.'

Plant stood up.

'It doesn't have to be pizza, does it, darling?'

'There's a good Thai,' Plant said.

'A good Thai. What bliss,' she said. 'After all that talk of torture a good tie sounds just the thing. Tie me up, tie me down, tie me any which way. Is it licensed?'

'It's licensed.'

'I am yours for life, darling,' she said.

Afterwards Plant suggested they drop by the backpackers' hostel and see if Dorritt felt like a drink. But Dorritt had checked out.

Thirty

Plant boiled water and made tea and sat out on the wooden deck of his wooden cabin. He sat in the morning sun, absorbing prahna in the hope of energising himself. Where were the mornings of waking fresh and vigorous, leaping into the day's excitement? The goannas sunned themselves, warming up to operating temperature. The noisy miners and honeyeaters hopped around the bushes. He could hear insects buzzing, humming. Worker bees. Or maybe just drones, droning on about where have all the flowers gone, where is all the enthusiasm of yesteryear.

The day's excitement arrived in the form of Angela Dark, warpaint freshly applied, protective dark glasses astride the nose, the nose sniffing out its target.

The target sat there, gracelessly.

'There's some tea just made. Help yourself to a chair.'

She dragged out a chair, passed on the tea, choked on a cigarette.

'No Sperrit?' said Plant.

'Sleeping in.'

'Not writing his memoirs.'

'What memoirs?'

'The ones he came up here to write.'

'Is that the story?'

'It's the one you told me.'

'What an extraordinary thing to tell anybody,' she said.

'So what attractions does the day hold?'

'You, darling,' said Angela.

'You don't just want me for my body,' said Plant.

'No, darling, I want you for your motor car.'

'Is that so?'

'I thought we might go out and see Rose.'

'Rose?'

'You visited her the other day so don't say you don't know how to get there.'

'You seem to know everything without my saying a word.'

'That's right,' she said. 'So just finish that cup of tea and let's go.'

'Is this an order from your boss?'

'I'm my own boss,' said Angela.

'I'm not sure that answers the question,' said Plant.

'Probably not,' said Angela.

Rose had the table laid for lunch, the wine uncorked and breathing, the ceiling fans caressing the air, the French windows opened onto the verandah, the lawn mown, the view down the valley enchanting, Mount Warning looming over the horizon, wreathed with its familiar cloud.

'Looks like you were expecting company,' said Plant.

'I sense these things,' Rose said, 'and I am rarely disappointed.'

'So put that in your pipe and smoke it,' said Angela.

'You want a smoke?' said Rose. She took a tray from a side table with a bowl of dope, manicured, seeds and stalks removed, a packet of rolling tobacco and rolling papers, and handed it to Plant. 'I could probably find you a pipe if you insist.'

'This will be fine,' said Plant.

'You wait,' she said. 'Fine isn't the word for it. This is the best.'

'You always insisted on the best,' said Angela.

'And didn't I always get it?' said Rose

Angela shrugged.

'Don't put yourself down,' said Rose. 'I got you, didn't I?'

Plant found himself a chair and sat down. For a few moments he looked at the view down the valley, then he turned to look at Rose and Angela but they had disappeared. He could could hear them talking out back somewhere. Then one of them played a Janet Seidel disc, and their words were obscured. He rolled a joint. A three-paper one. And smoked it. There were worse ways of spending the day.

'So how are the investigations going?' Rose asked.

The calm of the Northern Rivers had settled all about them. All about Plant. He sat back sated. Not a word he used often. But one he would use now. Up to a point. There were still some unsated areas. But give them time. He was feeling optimistic. The glass of Hastings River Verdelho was beside him on the floor. Barely touched. The bowl of dope was on the tray, on his lap. Touched, certainly, gouged out, even, but it was a big bowl. He shook it and the grass sifted level and looked barely touched too. Dorritt would turn up again in the fullness of time. Hopefully. And he was feeling full of hope. Now.

'Manners,' said Angela. 'The lady asked you a question.'

He dragged his attention back from the music. Emma Pask playing now.

'Oh, me?' said Plant, modestly. 'I thought she was speaking to you.'

'No you didn't,' said Angela. 'I'm on the editorial pages. I don't do investigations.'

'As for investigations,' said Plant, 'our servants will do them for us.'

'So, boy,' said Rose, 'how are they going?'

'Which investigations would they be?' said Plant.

'About Charley Dorritt, jerk,' said Angela.

'Oh, Charley Dorritt,' said Plant. He lit a joint and inhaled, held his breath, offered it to Angela who he knew would refuse.

She refused. He offered it to Rose.

'You hang onto it,' she said. 'I'll roll my own.'

'Third and last chance,' said Angela. 'Charley Dorritt.'

'He seems to have disappeared again,' said Plant.

'Oh dear,' said Rose. 'What a pity.'

'It is, somewhat,' Plant agreed. 'He was about to tell me how you'd kidnapped him and kept him as a sex slave.'

They laughed. It was quite a melodious laugh. Tuneful and soprano. Like Rhine maidens.

'Who kidnapped and enslaved him, darling?' said Angela.

'You two.'

They laughed again. It was going to be an amusing afternoon. Very comical.

Angela took a swig of wine. It was a gesture that bespoke determination.

'He said he was locked up in a shed as a prisoner,' said Plant.

'Sex prisoner,' said Rose.

'It would make a great TV series,' said Angela. 'We should get Sperrit to do a treatment.'

'But you'd have to lock him up,' said Rose. 'To make sure he got it written.'

'And strap him down,' said Angela.

'He'd come at that,' said Rose.

'He'd come at anything,' said Angela.

'They're quite serious allegations,' said Plant. It sounded heavy but they were irritating him. Breaking the mood of relaxation. Making him talk about work.

'He was locked up for his own good, darling,' said Angela. 'I told you already.'

'He was hallucinating,' said Rose. 'He kept trying to wander off and walking round in circles. He'd have got lost, or fallen over, if we hadn't locked him up.'

'Or got taken by a snake or something,' said Angela.

'So you took him instead.'

'For his own good,' said Angela. 'Till the mushrooms wore off.'

'Then he asked for more,' said Rose.

'Like Oliver Twist,' said Angela.

'So he got more,' said Rose. 'We didn't want to seem like wicked old orphanage keepers.'

'This was the modern world,' said Angela. 'The beginning of the age of plenty. To hell with nineteenth-century novels. To hell with Dickens.'

'I never did like Dickens,' said Rose.

'Nor did I,' Plant agreed.

'None of us did,' said Angela.

'Not enough explicit sex,' said Plant. 'Tell me about the sex slavery.'

'We might,' said Rose.

'You want the oral narrative or the video?' said Angela.

Thirty One

'I felt sorry for him,' said Rose. 'All buttoned up. Shut in there. So I wanted to make it up to him.'

'Unbutton him,' said Angela.

'Loosen him up a bit,' said Rose.

'Let him out to play,' said Angela.

'His inner man,' said Rose.

'And his little outer man, too,' said Angela.

'Philanthropy,' said Rose. 'In its fullest sense.'

'Like Hemingway's nurse,' said Plant, to restore the literary tone.

'Absolutely.'

'Aid workers rather than war criminals,' said Plant.

'Yes.'

'Though it's sometimes hard to tell the difference,' he added.

'It depends whose side you're on,' said Rose.

'Whose side are you on, Plant darling?' asked Angela.

He sat there in the shaded room, the fan revolving gently above him, the spreading valley out before him, the mown lawns, the fruiting trees, mandarin and mango and paw paw, and all the other trees he could not identify by name, lychees and tamarillos and durian for all he knew, and wondered. He wasn't sure if there were sides, let alone which one he might be on. It all seemed very comfortable and free of sides.

'How long did you keep him there?' he asked.

'Not long,' said Rose.

'Hardly any time at all,' said Angela.

'Just a moment in the vast eternity of things,' said Plant.

'Something like that, yes,' said Rose.

'We had to do it,' said Rose. 'For his own good.'

'Do what?' asked Plant.

She smiled.

'All of it,' she said. 'That's what you want me to say, isn't it?'

'I don't mind what you say.'

'As long as it turns you on.'

'I'm not sure locking people up turns me on.'

'You should try it some time,' she said.

'I'll pass.'

'He was off his face. Really.'

'He was always off his face,' said Angela.

'But after the mushrooms he was right off. He might have done anything. He didn't know what he was doing. He could have climbed in the water tank and drowned himself. Or tried to fly off the roof and broken his neck. We couldn't just sit there holding his hand. We had things to do.'

'What things?' asked Plant.

'Things,' said Rose. 'Washing things. Cleaning things. Cooking things. Planting things. Reaping things. They don't just do themselves.'

'We had a paper to get out,' said Angela.

'Did you?'

'Did we what?'

'Get it out.'

'The whole collective was about the paper,' said Angela.

'But did you ever get another one out?'

'We were always getting them out.'

'How long was always?'

'Hell, I don't know, darling. Till we stopped, I guess.'

'And when was that?'

'It was stopping then,' said Rose. 'That was the problem. The paper was a problem. And Charley was a problem. There were too many problems.'

'So you locked one of them out of sight.'

'We knew where he was,' Rose said. 'And I went and visited him.'

'And screwed him.'

She puckered her lips.

'No point in having a sex slave if you don't make use of it,' she said.

'I see,' said Plant.

'No, you don't,' said Rose. 'I felt sorry for him, can't you see? He was totally freaked out. I went in to take him some dinner. And he was huddled up in a heap in the middle of the floor. On his sleeping bag. He wouldn't get up. He wouldn't move. He was having a really bad trip. So I tried to help him. I put the food down and sat down next to him. I told him not to freak. Think of something nice, you know. Just switch channels. If you don't like what you're getting, get something else. It's easy if you know. But you've got to know. And he didn't. He was just locked into this bad stuff. So I got him out of it. I got him talking and calmed him down and fed him some food and in the end he came round. He stopped whimpering. He started to smile. Like he was getting off on it again. I was so relieved. I didn't want him freaked out. You don't want anyone to be like that. I mean, it made me pretty freaked out, too. So when he got it together, like I said, I was so relieved. And then he reached out and put his arms round me. And so. That's how it happened.'

She lit a joint.

'Turn you on?' she asked Plant. 'Or do you need the anatomical details?'

'Spare us the details,' groaned Angela.

'Plant?' Rose asked.

'As you like,' he said. 'Whatever you feel comfortable with.'

'And the next morning he was fine and you let him out,' said Plant.

'The next morning I took him his breakfast,' said Angela. 'Ollie was cooking up an omelette and he said take some in to Charley. So I did.'

'That was thoughtful.'

'Yes,' said Angela, 'I thought so.'

'Thoughtful of Ollie and thoughtful of you.'

'We were thoughtful people,' said Angela.

Plant was thoughtful too.

'What sort of omelette was it?' he asked.

'Just an omelette. You know, eggs and things.'

'It wouldn't have been a mushroom omelette?'

'Yes, well, darling, I didn't know that at the time, did I?'

'And he ate it?'

'He was hungry.'

'He ate it all?'

'He ate it all.'

'You didn't have any of it?'

'I was a Vegan in those days,' Angela said.

'Were you indeed?'

'So I didn't eat eggs.'

'And you weren't tempted to pick out the bits of mushroom?'

'I'd had my breakfast.'

'Consisting of?'

'I have no fucking idea,' she said.

'And then what happened?'

'And then what happened when?'

'When you'd fed him his omelette.'

'I fucked him, didn't I?'

'I don't know. You tell me.'

'In detail?'

'Whatever it takes.'

'It was no big deal. He was horny. I was horny.'

'A meeting of true minds.'

'It was what people did, then,' she said.

'Still do,' said Plant.

She looked at him, chilly.

'I doubt it,' she said.

'And having fucked him you locked him up and left.'

'He was getting weird again,' she said. 'The omelette had started to work. He started tripping so I got out.'

'Locking the door behind you.'

'I told you, there wasn't a lock. It was a sheet of corrugated iron with a bar across.'

'And you put the bar across.'

'For the time being,' she said. 'I didn't know what else to do. So I went back to the house and told Huxter and Ollie he was tripping again.'

'And what did they do?'

'They went to have a look.'

'Have a look or have a word?'

'I've no idea,' she said, 'you'd have to ask them.'

'I'm asking you.'

She lit another cigarette.

'Can't help you.'

'Or won't.'

'Take your pick,' she said.

'So they went in and interrogated him.'

'There might have been a few questions they wanted to put to him. Clear up a few loose ends.'

'And what did you do?'

'I took a shower,' she said.

Thirty Two

Plant could see the whole distasteful scene. The filthy shed, the dirt floor, the cobwebs, the spiders, the filthy sleeping bag, the filthy Dorritt, deranged and dribbling, being screwed first by Rose and then by Angela.

Dorritt. He should be so lucky.

'Tell me about the torture,' he said.

'There wasn't any torture as such,' said Rose.

'Meaning?'

'Meaning there wasn't any.'

'As such.'

'As such.'

'What does as such mean?' Plant asked.

'It means we didn't set out to torture him.'

'But in the inevitable course of events you did.'

'No,' said Rose. 'We just asked him a few questions. Or they did. Huxter and Ollie. And he got freaked out.'

'At the questions?'

'At the questions.'

'Why was that?'

'I guess he couldn't answer them.'

'Or wouldn't,' suggested Plant.

'Or wouldn't,' she agreed.

'So what happened then?'

'They just asked them again.'

'And how long did this go on for?'

'I don't know. I wasn't there all the time. I left.'

'And when you came back?'

'That was ages later.'

'They were still asking them then?'

'Yes,' she said.

'It must have been exhausting,' said Plant.

'For everyone, darling,' said Angela.

'You were there too?'

'I just popped in.'

'And what was happening?'

'Like Rose said, they were asking questions.'

'Who were?'

'She told you. Huxter and Ollie.'

'And Sperrit?'

'I don't remember if he was there,' said Rose, 'or if he was asking questions.'

'Oh, he was there,' said Angela. 'But he didn't say much.'

'So what were Huxter and Ollie saying?'

'They were just asking Dorritt what he was doing and why was he doing it and who sent him.'

'Why would they care?'

'You might well ask, darling,' said Angela.

'I am asking.'

'Well, I don't fucking know.'

'We were alternative,' said Rose.

'Go on.'

'We were a challenge to the state.'

'You really think so?' Plant asked.

'That's what Huxter said. He said they'd try and stamp us out because we represented a challenge.'

'What sort of challenge?'

'Oh, obscenity, sex, drugs, the women's movement.'

'All the staples of the global media,' said Plant.

'Not then, they weren't,' said Angela.

'And you bought that?' said Plant.

'Bought what?'

'That you represented a challenge.'

'Of course,' said Rose. 'That was the whole point of doing the paper. To be a challenge. Why bother, otherwise?'

'So who did Huxter think Dorritt was working for?'

'He wasn't sure. That's what he was trying to establish. The CIA or ASIO or special branch or the drug squad.'

'Mossad, NSA, MI6, Savak,' said Angela.

'Why would they be interested?' asked Plant.

'Why would anyone be interested, darling?' said Angela.

'But Huxter believed this.'

'Possibly.'

'What do you mean, possibly?'

'Who knows what Huxter believed,' said Angela. 'Maybe he was just making sure. Maybe he'd done too many mushrooms. Maybe he'd read too many conspiracy books and just wanted to spice up his life. It can get pretty dull living out in the sticks, I can tell you. Maybe Dorritt was a godsend. Gave him something to do. Something else to worry about. Save him from having to get the paper out. Gave him a purpose in life.'

'And Ollie?'

'He was an American,' said Rose. 'That's how Americans go on. Defending democracy. Worrying about human rights. Strafing women and children with depleted uranium. Locking people up without trial and interrogating and torturing them.'

'Meanwhile, back on the farm, life went on as normal,' Plant said.

'Pretty much,' said Angela.

'It was pretty much all falling apart anyway,' said Rose.

'Which?' Plant asked.

'It was pretty much falling apart and it pretty much always had been so it was all pretty much as normal,' said Angela.

'Why was it falling apart?'

They sat on the couch facing him, Angela with a glass of wine, Rose with a joint. Somehow they'd ended up sitting together. He hadn't noticed. Too busy rolling joints, no doubt.

No doubt about it, drugs contributed to attention deficit. That's what they were for. In large part. The parts that registered. Or didn't register. One or the other. Or both.

'That's the way it is,' said Angela. 'Dust to dust and ashes to ashes.'

'We'd been doing it a long time,' said Rose. 'It seemed like a long time. That's why we moved from the city. We were getting stale. But Huxter and Ollie weren't really back to nature people. They weren't really country boys.'

'Not much interest in country matters,' said Angela.

'So it was getting pretty boring,' said Rose. 'In terms of relationships.'

'Which was why you screwed Dorritt?'

'I guess it passed the time, darling,' said Angela. 'A sort of stop-gap, if that doesn't sound too indelicate.'

She put her arm round Rose.

'It kept us off the streets. For a while.'

'And Dorritt?'

'Kept him out of the gutter,' said Angela. 'He was fed and housed.'

'Drugged and locked up,' said Plant.

'What's the difference to someone like him?' Angela asked.

'And you visited him regularly?'

'He wasn't a great stud, darling. We didn't want to tax his reserves.'

'You found him attractive?'

They giggled, bunching up against each other, tactile and mirthful.

'What sort of question is that?' asked Rose.

'Do we hear the sounds of the male ego?' asked Angela. 'Competitive, envious, jealous?'

'So how did you work out the roster?'

'What roster?' asked Rose.

'How did you decide whose turn it was?'

'We were a collective,' said Rose.

'We didn't believe in authoritarian systems,' said Angela. 'No rules, no pack-drill.'

'Just come and get it,' said Rose.

'First through the door,' said Plant.

'And second, too,' said Rose. 'You really are competitive. I'd never have thought it. It must be very stressful.'

'He needs a course of relaxation therapy,' said Angela.

They seemed to be ceaselessly crossing and uncrossing their legs, wriggling closer to each other, sinking deeper and deeper into the couch, the two of them merging into one flesh.

'This was the new age,' said Rose.

'The dawning of the age of Aquarius,' said Angela.

'Share and share alike,' said Rose.

'We were the ocean he swam in,' said Rose.

'We cradled him between us,' said Rose.

'Until we found we didn't need him,' said Angela.

'And could do perfectly well without him,' said Rose.

They laughed their tinkling Rhine-maiden laugh, alluring, seductive and yet somehow unapproachable, impenetrable.

'That was the time we all got it off together.'

'Just the one time?' Plant asked.

'Tell him, Rosie.'

'You tell him, Angela. You're the journalist.'

'I'm not sure we should tell him anything more,' said Angela. 'It's turning him into a voyeur.'

'Oh, come on,' said Plant, 'now you've aroused my curiosity.'

'Is that all we've aroused?' said Rose.

'I think we should make him beg for it,' said Angela.

'He's always begging for it, aren't you, Plant?' said Rose.

'It wasn't planned,' said Angela.

'We just slipped into it.'

'Or he just slipped into us.'

Plant winced.

'I know that sounds crass,' said Rose.

'It was crass,' said Angela.

'Yes, it was crass,' Rose agreed.

'But fun.'

'Fun, too.'

They smiled at Plant from the couch.

'I'd just dropped by to bring him his evening meal,' said Rose.

'The original lingerie waitress,' said Angela.

'But he wasn't interested.'

'In the meal,' said Angela.

'He wouldn't eat it,' said Rose.

'Couldn't face any more mushroom omelettes, pasta al funghi, stir-fried noodles with mushrooms, grilled mushrooms marinated in white wine, mushroom soup.'

'I felt so sorry for him,' said Rose. 'He was so freaked out. I just held him in my arms. And one thing followed another.'

'And that's where I came in,' said Angela. 'The thing that walked in the night.'

'The dessert,' said Rose.

'Balinese fruit salad with mushrooms.'

'He didn't want that either,' said Rose.

'But he knew what he did want,' said Angela. 'He reached out an imploring arm. I took it. He drew me down to the sleeping bag. There he was inside it, naked. There was Rosie too, naked.'

'So Dorritt and I undressed Angela,' said Rose,

'I think the mushrooms must have acted like cocaine,' said Angela. 'Priapism, I think they call it. Or is it satyriasis?'

'Plant would know,' said Rose.

'Tell us, Plant.'

'Either would do,' said Plant.

'Just like Charley,' said Angela. 'Either would do. And either did do, indeed.'

They wrapped arms around each other.

'And when he got tired,' said Rose.

'Which wasn't for a long time,' said Angela.

'He asked us to put on a little show for him.'

'Which we did.'

'And that livened him up.'

'Reawakened him.'

'And so the days passed,' said Rose. 'Such sweet slavery.'

They smiled at each other on the couch there. Rose took a drag on her joint and passed it to Angela. Angela took a toke and passed it back, tinged with lipstick. Then she took a swig of her wine and passed the glass across to Rose. Rose took a sip and ran her finger over the lipstick-stained rim. She examined her finger, kissed it, and leaned across to kiss Angela on the lips. When they showed no signs of separating, Plant said, 'I bet you do that for all the boys.'

'Those we think will appreciate it,' said Rose.

'So appreciate it,' said Angela.

Plant stood up.

'You off now,' said Angela. It wasn't a question.

'Lovely to see you again,' said Rose. 'Take some of the dope if you need it.'

It was a generous farewell gift. But unmistakably a firm farewell.

'Rose will drive me back,' said Angela.

Plant picked up the bowl of dope.

'You got a plastic bag or something?'

'In the kitchen,' said Rose, 'bottom drawer beside the sink.'

When he came back in, they had vanished.

He tipped the dope into the bag. All of it. And to think that little weasel Dorritt had been fucking them both. Again and again. What a disgrace, Plant reflected, what a waste. Ignoble reflections. But Plant was no stranger to ignoble reflections.

He grated down the gravel driveway in the blazing sun of the afternoon, adjusting his seat-belt as he drove. Adjusting his seat-belt, what was this, was he flying or something? He stopped at the gateway. Gazed cautiously in every direction, left along the road, right along the road, straight ahead over the hedge and across the cattle pasture. Maybe he should get out and look for mushrooms. Fucking Dorritt. What a waste.

He waited till a car roared past to assure himself he hadn't waited in vain. There were dangers around. He turned to follow it, but it was soon out of sight. Country drivers. He peered ahead, the shadows from the trees at the side of the road strobing as he passed, the effect hypnotic with its regular rhythm. Said to induce an epileptic fit in the susceptible. Anything for kicks.

He drove for miles through the country until he found a road to the coast. More miles of high tension. Calling them kilometers didn't make it any better. But in the end they brought him to what he wanted. An unmarked gap in the bush. An unsurfaced clay track. He pulled off onto it, bounced through a few potholes, and soared up to a view of the ocean and a sign prohibiting vehicle access. Except for those with permits. The beach was serrated with four-wheel drive tracks. A group of four-wheel drives had assembled near the tide line in the far distance. And the far distance was far distant. Pristine sand. Pristine except for the four-wheel drive tracks. A helicopter passed overhead. It was like a scene from yet another middle eastern war.

He rolled a joint from the stash he had removed in accord with Rose's kind offer. The only kind offer. Fuck them. Easier said than done. Roll, roll, roll. It was easy when the seeds and stalks had been removed. Like deboned meat. No trace of mad cow disease. Lick, lick, roll, roll. Strike, strike, lights, action, focus, focus on the match, focus on lighting the joint without your eyes crossing, without burning your nose, how could it

have become so difficult, he had to be stoned or something, no other explanation.

He inhaled deeply, keeping the car windows closed. Like an ancient Scythian beneath the blanket. Put a blanket over your head, heap the dope on the coals, and breathe in the smoke. The only blanket he could get beneath.

He took off his shoes and socks. Rolled up the bottoms of his trousers. More irrelevant allusions. Struggled out of the door. Hobbled through the four-wheel drive ruts. Headed for the sea. Like Virginia Woolf. Or Frederic March in *A Star is Born*. Escaping from womankind. Defeated by womankind. Janet Gaynor, Judy Garland. Barbra Streisand. Don't forget the remakes.

The sand was serrated in extraordinary patterns, solidified wave motion, geometric designs, miniaturised dunes, and desert landscapes. And then the last reaches of the waves would wash across it and obliterate it, or reconfigure it. Minute creatures pushed grooves along the soft surface, intent on getting somewhere in the indeterminacy of it all. Hidden ones shot out spurts of seawater, up into the air and across the sand.

At the tide's edge he stood and looked at the deep stretching indigo, the immense horizon, the immense blank horizon, not a ship in sight, not a yacht or container ship or fishing trawler. And the surf pounding. That eternal roar. And the beauty of it. Tears came to his eyes. He bent over and held his hands in the salt water and then reached up and wiped his eyes till they smarted.

I love all waste and solitary places where we taste the pleasure of believing what we see is boundless as we wish our souls to be, he intoned inwardly.

Do we? he wondered. Do I? Infinity rather appalled him. He wasn't at all sure he wanted to be boundless. He was always trying to keep things within bounds. Set up some borders. Categories. See it straight. Or bent. Defined, anyway.

He walked along the beach, along the edge of the tide line. Up near the bush were what looked like pieces of driftwood

but as he got closer he could see it was a naked couple fucking. One couple. It didn't make him happier. He turned round and walked back. Fishermen were emerging and standing out in the shallows or on the edge of the sand. Trying to kill fish. That didn't make him happier, either. Poor deluded fish, taking the bait. A huge bird soared past silently. It had to be an albatross. What else could it be? Something horribly symbolic. So symbolic its meaning could not even be expressed in words. The ultimate symbol of the inexpressible.

He walked out into the sea to cool his feet and legs. The surf was deceptive. Or his eyes were unreliable. A wave caught him and soaked his trousers. At least he'd left the dope safe and dry in the car. He headed back for it. What other pleasure was left for a solitary man?

Thirty Three

There was a message waiting for him back at reception. 'Phone immediately. Huxter.' He didn't like the immediately. But he knew if he sat there refusing it, it would torment him until he did phone. Better to get it over with and preserve the rest of the evening to peaceful thoughts. Or even unpeaceful ones.

'Where the hell are you?'

'Byron Bay,' said Plant.

'What took you so long? Get real. Get yourself a mobile.'

'I was out of range,' said Plant. Lost in the mists of kif with the mobile switched off.

'What's happening?' said Huxter.

'Well, let's see,' said Plant. 'I'm piecing together quite an interesting story.'

'I don't want the story pieced together,' said Huxter. 'That's the last thing I want. I know the fucking story. Have you found him?'

'Who?'

'You know who I mean.'

'Oh, Char…'

'Don't fucking say it on the fucking phone,' said Huxter.

'Sure,' said Plant.

'So have you?'

'Have I what?'

'Fucking found him.'

'I've talked to him. I told you.'

'So where is he?'

'He's up here,' said Plant.

'Where?'

'I'm not exactly sure where exactly at the moment,' said Plant.

Huxter swore.

'He moves around.'

'Just find him. And tell me what he said.'

'What he said was...'

'Not on the fucking phone.'

'Yes, right.'

'We need to have a talk,' said Huxter.

'That might be difficult,' said Plant. 'I mean, given the problem of not talking on the phone.'

'Just get here.'

'Sydney?'

'You think I'm on fucking Venus?'

'No, not Venus, I wouldn't think,' Plant said. 'Mars, maybe, or the moon even.'

'I'll see you tonight.'

'Tonight? It's a ten-hour drive.'

'Fucking fly.'

'Ah yes. If I can get a flight.'

'Just get one.'

'I'll do my best.'

'Just get one.'

Plant picked at the appalling airline food. He avoided the orange juice because he knew they'd killed passengers with it before. He avoided the meat because he'd read a novel about corruption in an airline food supply company. It was set in Asia, but what the hell, Australia was part of Asia, sometimes, depending on what politician was making speeches this week or next week. He ordered a bottle of red wine, one of the midget-sized bottles for midgets who could fit into airline seats without developing deep vein thrombosis, and then ordered another. He would have lit up a joint but government regulations prohibited smoking in

Australian air space. No regulations about getting poisoned in Australian air space. He would have ordered a third bottle, all one hundred and seventy five fragments of a litre of it, but the hostess made a point of avoiding him. He took at taxi from the airport. No smoking in taxis either.

He presented himself at reception. The girl with the Russian accent and superior manner phoned Huxter's office. Plant waited.

'Phone is busy,' she said.

'Could you leave him a message? He's expecting me.'

She phoned again. Reluctantly. A Russian curl to her lip.

'A plant to see you,' she said.

She listened to whatever was said.

'OK,' she said. Russianspeak.

She pushed the ledger across.

'You sign.'

He signed.

She scrutinised the signature, then pushed a lapel tag across with evident regrets. She gave him a floor number. He found the lift entrance by himself.

The romance of the press. Working late to preserve free speech, while others got drunk and watched television, and newspaper circulations declined.

Huxter was standing at the lift exit. He got in before Plant could get out.

'Let's go,' he said, pressing the close door button.

'We're going somewhere?'

'Can't talk there,' said Huxter, pressing another button.

They went back down.

'Must tell Fullalove that one,' said Plant. 'The offices are bugged.'

'Don't you fucking tell fucking Fullalove anything. Ever,' said Huxter. 'Or anyone else.'

'Message received,' said Plant. 'Merely joking.'

'And don't ever joke again.'

'I understand,' said Plant. Now he understood why the paper didn't have a good comics section. With people like Huxter working on it.

They took the lift down to the basement car park. Huxter led him to a car, a Lexus, expensive, but not more expensive than the maximum tax claim currently available for business cars. He pressed his key button and lights flashed. Plant got in on the passenger side. Huxter turned on the electrics and then reached across to the radio and switched it on. Something appalling from the national broadcaster.

'Where're we going?' Plant asked.

'We're not going anywhere.'

Plant turned to wind down the windows. There were no manual winders. It was a modern media executive's car.

He's going to gas me, Plant thought. Gas both of us. He's got a hose stuck in the exhaust pipe leading in somehow. He's crazed.

Huxter turned the radio up louder.

'We can talk here,' he said.

'Mind if I have a last smoke?' Plant asked.

'I do mind,' said Huxter.

So be it, decided Plant.

'What's he going to do?' Huxter asked.

'Dorritt?'

'Who the fuck else?'

'He seems to want to tell the world his sad story. Sex slavery and torture.'

'There wasn't any torture,' said Huxter, turning up the radio beyond normal tolerance levels.

'It's a matter of interpretation, I guess,' said Plant. 'You might argue he was locked up with snakes and spiders for his own good. And fucked silly into the bargain. Some people might

get off on that. But he could argue it was sexual abuse. Trendy legal issue, these days. Hard to disprove.'

A dark sedan came squealing down the ramp, its headlights raking across Huxter's windscreen. Plant put his arm across his eyes.

The man's insane, he's organised a hit squad.

The sedan went past and parked.

Now they'll creep up on us.

'Where's he staying?'

'He was at a backpackers' hostel.'

'Was?'

'He seems to have moved.'

'Where to?'

'Well...'

'You've lost him.'

'I found him for a while.'

'A lot of fucking use.'

'I did find him.'

'So where is he now?'

'He's still up there.'

'How do you know?'

'I know.'

'You psychic or something?'

'Yes,' said Plant.

'God help us,' said Huxter.

'He will if you ask nicely,' said Plant. 'Pray, you know.'

'Don't fucking blaspheme as well,' said Huxter.

'As well as what?'

'Just find him.'

'I'll go round the other backpackers', don't worry. I didn't do it today because I was talking to other people.'

'You were what?' Huxter shouted. 'Don't you talk to anybody. Anybody. Get that?'

'Sure.'

'This is a security matter.'

'So why aren't security doing anything about it?'

'Who says they aren't?'

That was a thought, thought Plant.

'You think they've nobbled Dorritt?'

'No.'

That was another thought.

'You know for sure?'

'What I know or don't know doesn't matter,' said Huxter.

'Fair enough,' said Plant.

'You got anything else to tell me?'

'I'm piecing the story together,' said Plant.

'I told you, I don't want the story pieced together. I want Dorritt.'

'Dead or alive,' said Plant.

'Don't fuck with me.'

'Promise,' Plant promised.

'You're hired to find him, not to talk to him.'

'I think I understand.'

'You'd better. Just find Dorritt. And don't talk to anyone.'

'Sure,' said Plant.

'Not even to Dorritt,' said Huxter. 'Especially not to Dorritt.'

Huxter switched off the radio and the electrics.

'That's it?' asked Plant.

Huxter got out of the car.

That was it.

Thirty Four

Plant sat in his flat, disoriented, listening to Chet Baker telling him 'You Don't Know What Love Is'. He seemed to have come a long way for very little. For a futile meeting with Huxter. It revealed Huxter's hysteria, but what use was there in that revelation? Huxter wasn't paying to have Plant point out he was hysterical. It was something Huxter either already knew or wouldn't want pointed out. Admittedly, on the surface, Plant hadn't achieved very much. He'd scored some dope. There was that. But from Huxter's point of view it didn't look much. And yet maybe it was. Maybe he knew more than he realised. If he wasn't stuck in Sydney maybe he could have already resolved it all. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed likely.

In the meantime he was back in his flat and he didn't like it. It depressed him. There was something about up north. The feeling was lighter, less oppressive. Maybe it was just the urban oppression of Sydney that was getting him down. Too many people. Maybe it was the squalor of his flat. It smelled bad after being shut up. Maybe if he sought out the bright lights of the city it would be better. He couldn't get back till tomorrow, so why not enjoy tonight? He could sit and watch television. He could read a good book. Or he could seek out companionship. At this time of night he couldn't think of a lot of companions who would appreciate his call. Indeed he could only think of one.

As ever Fullalove insisted on meeting in the dingiest, gloomiest bar he could come up with. Bright lights were not his preferred ambience.

Plant ordered a light beer and neglected it. Fullalove asked for a vodka and Coke. Pax Russo-Americana. And a second. And third.

'You're on expenses, man.'

'Not for this I'm not.'

'You wouldn't have called me up if you weren't.'

'Maybe I wanted company.'

'You want company you got to pay for it.'

'I've been told not to talk to anybody,' said Plant.

'That must be awfully lonely,' said Fullalove.

Drink, drink, drink said the neon beer advertisements. Gamble, gamble, gamble flashed the gaming machine lights. Fuck, fuck, fuck beat out the jukebox. Spend, spend, spend and be done. Hand it all over and crawl off and die.

'Why did you never write for *Rites*?' Plant asked.

'You still on about that crap?'

Plant conceded that he was.

'Because it was crap, man.'

'Why would that stop you?' Plant asked. 'I thought you figured all the press was crap.'

'That's true, comrade,' said Fullalove. 'That indeed is true.'

'So why single out *Rites*?'

'I didn't single it out.'

'But you never gave them anything.'

'Course I did,' said Fullalove. 'They just never ran anything.'

'That's amazing.'

'Cause it was such crap, how come they didn't run my crap, is that what you're saying?'

'Pretty much,' said Plant.

'You sure know how to raise a fellow's self-esteem.'

'I thought it was supposed to be alternative.'

Fullalove gave a grunt of derision.

'Underground. Oppositional.'

'So?'

'So who's more oppositional than you?'

Fullalove gave another grunt. A degree less derisive.

Plant waited. He sipped at his beer but the body refused it. Maybe he could go out on the footpath and have a smoke.

'It was crap, like I told you,' Fullalove said. 'They ran a mile from anything really oppositional. It was all cosmetic. These things always are. You've got a better chance of getting something oppositional into the *Wall Street Journal* than into one of these bullshit rags. That's what they were set up for. Bullshit. Make the suckers think they're getting something different. Another point of view. There isn't another point of view. Not that gets into print. You know that.'

'I guess so.'

'I'm telling you so.'

'So why do they bother?'

'Spoilers,' said Fullalove. 'To stop anyone setting up anything real. They occupy the space, make people think every angle's covered. If they weren't there, somebody'd say, "Hey, why don't we have an alternative street paper? Or a radical weekly? Or a critical monthly?" So this crap is put out to make it look like the gaps are filled.'

'Who puts it out, then?'

'Who does everything? The people who brought you the Gulf War, the Afghanistan war, the Iraq war, Pakistan, Kosovo, the women's movement, Vietnam, Solidarity, the Mujahaddin, the Contras, Cultural Freedom, Abstract Expressionism…'

Plant moved his beer glass around on the table.

'How come no one knows?'

'I know,' said Fullalove, 'you know. What do you mean, no one knows? The stories are always leaking. But they're last year's stories. Or the year before that. By the time they've leaked the war's over and they've started on a new one. Look, man, all you've got to do is look at the patterns. It's always the

same handful of dirty tricks. The same phony opposition. The same covert funding.'

'But people didn't know about *Rites*. Assuming what you say is true.'

'People didn't care about *Rites,* full stop. It was so crappy. But anyone with half a brain knew. It never ran a real radical piece. Anyone in the anti-war movement, anyone in the anti-racist alliance, anyone against the system, they all knew it was crap. It was such crap they didn't even let it worry them. Everyone knew Huxter was a government man. Always was, always will be. And his American boyfriend was CIA.'

'Really?'

'All Americans abroad are CIA,' said Fullalove. 'You know that. Why would they leave God's own country and live here, for God's sake? To do the Lord's work. Mormons. Media-Mormons.'

'You know for sure Huxter was a government man?'

'Sure as I can be without official confirmation. Which I'm not likely to get.'

'So how do you know?'

'Why so anxious?' asked Fullalove. 'You're working for him, why not just ask him?'

'Well, he wouldn't say, would he?'

'No, he wouldn't.'

'I don't get it,' said Plant.

'Get what?'

'I don't get what I've got into,' said Plant.

'Get me another vodka and pour out your troubles, comrade,' said Fullalove, 'and I'll set you right.'

Plant got him another vodka. And Coke.

'You capable of keeping a secret?' Plant asked.

'No,' said Fullalove.

'But no one's going to print anything you write any more, are they?'

'Not if they can help it,' said Fullalove.

'This thing I'm working on,' said Plant

'What do you mean thing?' Fullalove asked.

'Well, I don't think it's going to be a story.'

'That wouldn't be the first time.'

'This jerk Dorritt says he was doing a security survey on alternative papers, underground presses. And when he got to *Rites* they locked him up, fed him mushrooms, and interrogated him.'

'You left out the torture and sex slavery bits,' said Fullalove.

'You know?'

'Sure.'

'How do you know?'

'I read his teaser in the Writers' Centre magazine. I keep up.'

'Huxter was one of the interrogators.'

'So?'

'What do you mean, so? If Huxter was a government man, why would he lock up and interrogate another government man?'

'Are you putting me on, or have you got something especially devious in that twisted mind of yours?' Fullalove asked.

'It's a straight question.'

'And this is why you dragged me out in the middle of the night and forced vodka down my throat?'

Plant nodded.

'Why would Huxter lock up and interrogate Dorritt? Not to forget to mention torture and sexual slavery, too? Is that the question?'

'Yes.'

'Because Huxter didn't want his pissy little paper exposed as a security services operation.'

'But Dorritt was running a security services operation too.'

'Maybe nobody told that to Huxter. Maybe he thought Dorritt was authentic.'

'Authentic? '

'I know it's a difficult concept.'

'What could he have thought Dorritt could have possibly been?'

'A true scholar? The agent of a hostile foreign power? A snoop from the Socialist Workers' Alliance? And he was worried Dorritt was going to show how the paper didn't make economic sense, and end up tracing the source of the funding.'

'Is that likely?'

'Anything's likely in the world of the secret state.'

'But what if Huxter knew Dorritt was part of a government operation too?'

'He'd still have to sort out Dorritt, wouldn't he? Lock him up, set him straight, drive him bonkers, whatever he did.'

'Why? '

'To preserve his own cover, obviously. To try to regain street cred. Which, for the record, he never had and never did regain. To make it look like *Rites* was for real and he was for real. Which it wasn't and he wasn't. Why else?'

'Why else?' Plant nodded.

'Anybody with half a brain could figure it out,' said Fullalove. 'That's why they moved up the coast. Get away from the rumours. Weasel their way into a new community that maybe hadn't heard the rumours. Look,' said Fullalove, 'just follow the money. Who would put up money for a paper like that? No advertising. It could never pay its way. Had to be CIA or some fucking thing. Rumours spread.'

'How?' Plant asked.

'They just do. Maybe someone just figured it out. Or maybe someone didn't like him. Some inter-agency squabble. Some rivalry over promotion, so someone tries to knock him off the

board. Maybe he talked himself. Got boastful. Unwisely. Who knows?'

'You don't know?'

'I didn't say that,' said Fullalove.

'So.'

'So Huxter hears these stories. Or the spooks pick up on them and tell him. So he has to restore his street cred. Put on an act to try and make it look like he was for real. So he locks up Dorritt and tortures him and feeds him drugs and the word gets round, because it always does, that Huxter's caught a government spook and tortured him. So Huxter looks good for a while. Which he wasn't. That would've been the idea. He figures that by fingering Dorritt for a government man, people will think he can't be one himself, not if he tortures someone he says is a government man.'

'But Dorritt was a government man. He admits it.'

'Yes, well, tough luck for Dorritt. Tends to happen when there's so many of them around, they start treading on each other's toes. Or nipping them off with bolt cutters. It's called friendly fire in the military.'

'It's a possibility,' said Plant.

'It's more than a possibility, as you very well know,' said Fullalove. 'And now Dorritt's started blabbing and Huxter's up for high editorial office and he's got to do it all over again.'

'Do what?'

'Try and regain his non-existent street credibility.'

'Oh, yes. I thought you meant lock Dorritt up again and drug him and...'

'And torture him and fuck him stupid. Well, maybe. If he doesn't do that, how else is he going to keep Dorritt quiet? The only difference is, last time he wanted the torture bit public. Make it seem like he was one of the good guys. Torturing undercover intelligence agents, looks good in the alternative. But this time it'll have to be done quietly. Since to be a good

guy in global media these days you can't afford to be seen on the internet with the electric prod and the hypodermic in your hands and the dogs slavering beside you. Maybe this time he'll pass on the torture and sex slavery and just get Dorritt eliminated.'

'Shit,' said Plant.

'You said it,' said Fullalove. 'This is where you come in.'

'Me?'

'Why else did he hire you?'

'I'm not a killer,' said Plant.

'You don't have to be. You've just got to set up the hit. Find where Dorritt is. So the contract man knows where to go.'

'You're not serious?'

Fullalove laughed.

'Stay cool,' he said. 'They don't order that many killings.'

'To be honest,' said Plant, 'I can't see what all the fuss is about.'

'Honesty!' said Fullalove.

'It seems a lot of fuss about nothing,' said Plant. His instinct was to defuse it, minimize it, distance any talk about killings. 'Who cares if people know Dorritt was spooking around?'

'Looks like some people do,' said Fullalove.

'But I can't see why.'

'National security.'

'I can't see how national security is involved in spooking around poetry magazines and small presses a couple of decades ago.'

'You think national security was all about the old KGB and Russian spies and moles in Foreign Affairs. And now it's all terrorists and al-Qa'eda and illegal immigrants.'

'And it isn't?' said Plant, with the bored tones of one confronted by the self-evident.

'In a word, no. That's all distraction. Diversion. Disinformation. The Russians always knew what the West was doing. And vice

versa. There weren't any secrets. All those cold-war spy novels, they were just distraction from the real issue. Which was controlling your own citizens. Keeping the secrets from reaching them. The real operations are internal, against your own dissidents. Disempowering your own opposition. Neutralising intellectuals. Suborning trades unionists. Controlling the media. That's the real story. That's the big story that never comes out. And controlling the media makes sure it never does come out.'

The jukebox hammered its remorseless, mindless beat. The poker machines flashed and whirred and sucked in their tribute. Drinks were served.

'Of course Dorritt was small potatoes. So was Huxter and his silly paper. It's all small potatoes. And they keep it that way. Nothing gets out of control. It's all monitored, all the time. And any time somebody starts actually saying anything they get closed down. Moved on. Burned down. Lose finance. Lose advertising. Lose distribution. Lose staff. Lose their job. The mass media is totally controlled, even you know that, just a handful of players. Key people in key positions. Everybody's owned, man. If you're not owned you're feral. And what use are you to anyone then? Who's going to give a feral creature airplay? Column inches? You're either owned or you're nowhere.'

'So if everything's controlled, what was the point of Dorritt's survey?'

'There's always idealists. Naive fuckers who think they can do something radical. It's all controlled but new things start up. They've got to be identified. Monitored. Snuffed out or taken over. Having a captive alternative is part of the strategy. Dorritt's project was so they could keep their tabs on it. Control, man, that's what it's all about.'

He didn't want to ask it, but he had to. He'd try to repress it but it wouldn't go away, not now Fullalove had verbalised it.

'So if it's so serious, why don't they just bump Dorritt off?'

'Do you realise how big it all is?' Fullalove asked. 'Multiply it. It's not just media. Run the same system of controls through education. Through the universities. Through the schools. Through the unions. Through the greenies. Through the political parties, drugs, movies, television, music, the entertainment industry. Through the churches. Through the cults. They've got their tabs on everything. They have to. Everybody. If they started bumping people off it would be a fucking holocaust. They'd never stop once they'd started. It's too big. Can't you see that? Even they wouldn't be able to keep it quiet. People would notice. All they can do is keep hosing it down. Constant vigilance, mate. And it provides work. Don't forget that. Bureaucracies are only as powerful as they're big. The more people they have to watch, the bigger they grow. If they bumped people off they'd have nothing left to do, would they? And they wouldn't get away with it. There'd be too many.'

'That's kind of reassuring, put like that,' said Plant. 'Reassuring in one way but kind of scary in others.'

'Scary,' said Fullalove, 'yes, I suppose you could call it that. Reassuring I don't know about.'

Thirty Five

That night Plant had Dorritt's dream. Everything about the man was contagious. Everything except his seemingly fatal attraction to women. He sat up sweating, cautiously reaching for the light, tentatively, ready to recoil from the scaly folds. He looked up at the rafters. There were no rafters. He eased himself out of the sheet, raised it, nothing in the bed. Peered down the side, underneath, nothing, neither carpet snake nor carpet slippers nor carpet.

It took a while, sitting there, huddled in the mess that was his life, to calm down. Drop the heartbeat to a feasible rate. Wasn't it reptiles that had a low pulse?

And then it came back to him. The hut. The banana shed. He wasn't in it. But he knew who was. Dorritt had gone back there. That was why Angela Dark had wanted the ride out to the farm. She and Rose had got their sex slave back. He was hiding out in the hut. Writing his fucking memoirs. Or ghosting fucking Sperrit's. Or fucking Rose and Angela.

It was still pre-dawn. But getting there. He took a shower, shaved, dressed, that was it, didn't need to pack, his bags were still up the coast, couldn't eat, there wasn't any food in the flat. He would go straight out to the airport and get a flight up north, Ballina, Coolangatta, Lismore, Casino, Brisbane, anywhere as long as it got him close, even if it took him all day.

It took him all day.

The setting sun was stretching out the hills when Plant arrived at the farm. Mount Warning loomed darkly, crowned with its wreath of cloud. Sperrit was leaning against a verandah post,

beer can in hand, shirt tail adrift, belly distended, like a satisfied boa constrictor.

'Get back all right?' he said.

'Not really,' said Plant. 'The much vaunted benefits of deregulation, competition and the free market never seem to be around when you need them. Not with airlines. Or anything else.'

'Commie talk,' said Sperrit. 'You've been seeing your mate Fullalove.'

'He's no mate of mine,' said Plant.

'We wait to hear the cock crow,' said Sperrit. He raised a hand. 'Hark.'

It crowed.

'As a matter of fact, yes, I have,' said Plant. The full pathetic bit. Betrayal followed by confession.

'I know,' said Sperrit. 'He's no good for you.'

'How do you know so much? How did you know I'd been in Sydney?' Plant asked.

'One keeps informed,' said Sperrit.

'Is that why they call you Spooky?'

'Ghostly, actually.'

'Sure it's not Spooky?'

'I don't think so. I wouldn't say that.'

'No?'

'Not if I were you.'

'Is that a threat?'

'Who needs threats?' said Sperrit.

'Sounded like you do,' said Plant.

'Not at all. If you want to know the truth...'

Plant laughed.

'Huxter mentioned it.'

'Lashing out on STD calls, is he?' said Plant.

'As a matter of fact he's here.'

'Here? How?'

'He flew up. He didn't seem to have any trouble getting a flight.'

'Where is he?'

'Inside,' said Sperrit. 'In the library. With your defector mate Dorritt.'

'Darling,' said Angela. 'We were so worried about you.'

'You wouldn't believe how much we missed you,' said Rose.

'Disappearing like that,' said Angela.

'In a puff of smoke,' said Rose.

Dorritt grinned like a shaggy sheep. He wore a new navy blue sweatshirt with BYRON BAY in bold white letters, new, pressed Country Road cotton trousers, and deck shoes. Deck shoes. Plant looked at him in disbelief.

'We kitted him out,' said Angela.

'Doesn't he look cute?' said Rose.

Dorritt simpered.

Huxter grunted.

'Nice to see you all,' said Plant.

'Isn't it?' said Rose. 'What would you like?'

'What have you got?'

'Everything your heart desires,' said Rose. 'Angela's sipping a cool white wine, Sperrit's having a Tasmanian beer, Huxter's gone for the imported mineral water, I'm having a smoke and Charley's having, what are you having Charley?'

'Everything,' said Dorritt.

'And Charley's having everything. And there are preserved mushrooms in that little jar.'

'Everything except the mushrooms,' said Dorritt.

'Give him time,' said Angela.

'A cup of tea and a smoke,' said Plant.

'And a good lie down,' said Dorritt. And bleated.

'You seem pleased with yourself,' said Plant.

'I am,' said Dorritt.

'That's good,' said Plant.

'I've had a good talk to Huxter.'

'That's nice,' said Plant. 'I'm glad you two met again.'

'No thanks to you,' said Huxter.

'I wouldn't say that,' said Plant.

'I would,' said Huxter.

'I was about to phone you. As soon as I'd confirmed he was here.'

'Ghostly already did.'

'Ghostly,' said Plant.

He looked round the room. The library. Over-size television, DVD player, CD player and a couple of book-cases, one full of CDs, the other full of DVDs. Not a book in sight.

He rolled himself a smoke from the bowl on the table. Ineptly. All thumbs.

'Ghostly,' he said. 'Of course. That's why he buzzed off the other night.'

'Quick thinking, darling,' said Angela.

'He wanted a private word with me,' said Dorritt.

'Did he now? What about?'

'It was private.'

'That sort of word,' said Plant.

Dorritt tittered.

'And what about your public words?' Plant asked.

'Which are they?'

'Your memoirs.'

'Oh, my memoirs.' He looked reflectively round the room. 'I don't think I can write them now.'

'And why's that?'

'I think I've talked them out. I've told them to too many people. You and Sperrit and Huxter.'

'And us, darling,' said Angela. 'Don't forget the night with Rose and me. When you spilled everything, as it were.'

'I'll never forget that night,' said Dorritt. Unctuously. Extremely unctuously. Plant felt sick at the sound of it.

'I think that resolved a lot of things,' said Dorritt. 'I came to terms with a lot.'

'You certainly did,' said Rose.

'You were wonderful,' said Angela, ashing her cigarette in a plant pot.

'So now I'm free to write what I really want to write,' said Dorritt.

'And what's that?' Plant asked.

He shouldn't have. He should have said nothing. Let it go. But he had to know. Though he knew already.

'I'm writing a column for Huxter,' Dorritt said. 'Reviewing all the small press books. No one's been paying any attention to them. And they're really terribly important. So I'll be sort of monitoring that area.'

'Well, well,' said Plant.

'All about books,' said Dorritt. 'That's its title. Of course, it will include little magazines.'

'Of course,' said Plant.

'All about books,' Dorritt intoned again. In the library where there weren't any. 'It's as relevant as ever. Probably even more so.'

'Is that so?'

'In the current climate,' said Dorritt.

'Is it a weekly piece?' asked Plant.

'No, it isn't,' said Huxter. 'Monthly.'

'To begin with,' said Dorritt.

'You handing out any more columns?' Plant asked Huxter.

'No.'

'What about reviewing?'

'I've got enough reviewers,' said Huxter.

'Interviews?'

'No.'

'Investigations?'

‘Absolutely not.’
‘Just thought I’d ask,’ said Plant.
‘Save your breath,’ said Huxter.
‘Right,’ said Plant.
He inhaled deeply and saved it.
‘I wish you’d go outside if you have to smoke,’ said Huxter.
‘Yes, sir,’ said Plant.

Thirty Six

Out on the verandah Sperrit was talking to a Japanese man in a blue business suit, watching the fruit bats circling round the fruit trees. Sperrit introduced them.

'Our opposite number.'

'Opposite number in what?' Plant asked.

'Data bases,' said Sperrit.

The Japanese bowed and smiled.

'What sort of data?' Plant asked, but the opposite number was distracted by the heavy beating of leathern wings.

'Frying fox,' he said. He grinned with delight. 'Very tasty.'

'Tempura fugit,' agreed Plant.

The Japanese opposite number went inside the house.

'So you found Dorritt,' Plant said.

'In a manner of speaking,' said Sperrit.

'Why didn't Huxter hire you in the first place?'

'My good man,' said Sperrit, 'I am not for hire.'

'Already taken?'

'I will overlook that remark.'

'Well you would, wouldn't you,' said Plant. 'Couldn't you have done it as a favour? Pro bono work?'

'Too high a profile,' said Sperrit. 'People know me. Recognise me in the street. No, it had to be someone unknown. Unmemorable. Unimportant. Too risky otherwise. Which is why a professional wasn't hired. Word gets out. Couldn't afford that. It needed to be some nonentity who nobody knows and who knows nobody.'

'I see.'

'You were perfect.'

'Except I lost him.'

'We figured you would.'

'Is that so?'

'All factored in,' said Sperrit. 'But you provided the lead.'

'I see,' said Plant. 'Then you moved in for the kill.'

'Didn't have to kill him as it turned out.'

'That was lucky.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Sperrit.

The night sky was cloudless, studded with stars and the odd planet or two. Satellites beamed down appalling television and surveilled what could be surveilled.

'Look at that,' said Sperrit, gazing up into space. 'God's own country. You never see stars like that anywhere else in the world.'

'So he was in the shed.'

'The studio,' said Sperrit. 'It's been restored. Renovated. Rehabilitated.'

'Like Dorritt.'

'Much better job than they did with Dorritt. Beautiful finish. No expense spared.'

'And he went back there voluntarily.'

'Yes, eager little beaver, isn't he. He made himself quite at home there. Music. Electric kettle. Surprised you didn't come across him when you were out here. Got distracted, did you?'

'What was he doing?'

'Thinking about writing his memoirs, oddly enough. I told him that wasn't a good idea. Security and all that.'

'And he agreed?'

'Eventually,' said Sperrit. 'People usually see reason in the end. Huxter made him an offer, of course. Well, he had most to lose, didn't he?'

'I don't know, did he? What about security?'

'What about security?'

'Weren't they worried about it all coming out?'

'It was a long time ago.'

'It would have made an interesting read.'

'Who's to say it would ever have got into print?' said Sperrit.

'There is that, I suppose.'

'Always,' said Sperrit. 'Don't ever forget it.'

'Are you putting it in your memoirs?'

'My memoirs?'

'The ones you came up here to ghost-write.'

'Did I?'

'So you said.'

'I shouldn't think so.'

'It's a good story.'

'I'm sure anyone would be very ill-advised to tell it.'

'Is that the official word?'

'I don't know about official words,' said Sperrit. 'I'm just suggesting that anyone would be ill-advised to try and publish it.'

'I see.'

'I hoped you would.'

Sperrit took another beer from the six-pack at his feet.

'So I'm not really needed any more,' said Plant.

'Not really,' said Sperrit. 'Not at all, in fact. A superfluous man, I think is the phrase.'

'I have heard it.'

'I would imagine so. The man who might as well not have been, rather than the man who never was.'

'Thank you.'

'You're welcome. Just take the advice is my advice.'

'What advice is that?'

'Be as if you never were. Never existed. Never dreamed of happening.'

'I see.'

'Good.'

'Otherwise?'

'Otherwise, well, people might get to like the idea that you never were. Try to actualise the concept. But you're a sensible fellow, Plant. You wouldn't want anything untoward to happen.'

'Absolutely not,' said Plant.

Sperrit looked up at the sky again.

'Shooting star,' he said. 'I'd make a wish if I were you.'

'What sort of wish?' Plant asked.

'That none of this ever leaks out. That you're never even remotely tempted to write about it. Or talk about it. Not even to your smelly little friend Fullashit.'

'He'd love to hear it.'

'What makes you think he hasn't heard it already?' said Sperrit

'I don't see how.'

'Think about it. You can never tell who anybody's working for in this sort of business. And don't pretend you've never thought that about him before, either.'

'So what's my silence worth?' Plant asked.

'Not a lot,' said Sperrit. 'Your life, your wellbeing. I know that's not much. But it's the best offer you'll get. I'd grab it if I were you.'

The Japanese opposite number came out with a state of the art laser gun for night shooting. Whether weapon or camera, Plant preferred not to know.

He pointed it at Plant and laughed.

'Very humorous, huh.'

Back in the library Angela and Rose were sitting on the couch together.

'Do you want to stay the night?' they asked.

Plant looked round. Dorritt gave his whiskery grin. Sperrit stood in the doorway.

'I think I'll pass,' he said.

‘Some might say you failed,’ said Sperrit, as Plant walked out to his car.

Thirty Seven

He could have left it all there, Plant knew. Checked out, driven back. Packed, what was there to pack? But he didn't want to go back. The thought of his apartment depressed him. He liked it here.

He could just have stayed, of course. Walked on the beach. Paddled. Risked a swim, maybe. Looked for Swedish backpackers. The job was done. Such as it was. But he would have got bored. Paddling. Looking for seashells. So what was new? Not boredom.

It was the job. It didn't feel done. Not to his satisfaction. As far as Huxter was concerned it was done. That had been made clear. But Plant felt there was more. Wanted more, anyway.

It came. A phone call from Professor Oates. Emeritus Professor Oates. Dorritt's sometime supervisor.

Plant took the message at reception. He could have disregarded it. The job was done. The account was closed. Payment was ended. But he phoned back.

'So glad to have caught you,' said Oates. 'Thank you so much for returning my call.'

A bit fruity. More than a bit fruity. Plant found himself responding in kind.

'A pleasure,' he said.

'Really? You must enjoy phone conversations more than I do.'

All bonhomie. Plant made amused noises.

'I thought it might be good if we had a chat,' said Oates. 'Young Dorritt has told me so much about you.'

'You're been speaking to him?'

'Of course. Telepathy is all very well, but old-style conversation is much more reliable, I find. Don't you think?'

Plant waited for the snuffling, chuckling noises to cease.

'I'm so pleased things have worked out for him,' said Oates. 'At last. He's had a trying time. I wouldn't want anything to jeopardise his new found happiness.'

'Not at all.'

'Perhaps you'd like to come up for a spot of lunch since you're in the region. If that's not imposing on your valuable time.'

Plant leapt at it as he always did. Something to fill up the vast vacuities. Oates must have been reading his mind. Or his file.

'Delighted,' he said. 'The university?'

'Good Lord, no, no need for that. Quite informal. I'm retired now. Just up the road from you, in fact. Surfers Paradise.'

'Surfers,' said Plant.

'I hear the amazement in your voice. What's an old fellow like me doing in a place like this? Caught in that sensual music.'

Plant made demurring noises.

'When would suit you?' he asked.

'The sooner the better, I think,' said Oates. 'Don't you?'

'Suits me.'

'Then why not pop up today?'

Plant popped up. Just up the road. It still took a couple of hours' driving.

It was one of those massive, splendid megaliths right on the beach, hated by environmentalists, loved by developers and occupants. All glitz and glamour. Plant took the lift to the penthouse.

'Come in, dear boy,' said Oates. 'So nice of you to take the trouble.'

'No trouble,' said Plant.

'That's excellent,' said Oates. 'That's what I like to hear. No trouble. Let's have a drink to no trouble. Then we can potter out to lunch. What will you have?'

Plant said he would have a beer.

'I might join you in the same,' said Oates. As if he were slumming to put him at his ease.

He brought a couple of bottles of Nastro Azzurro from the fridge, and a couple of glasses to pour them into. Old World civilisation. None of the Sperrit straight-from-the-can style.

Oates was in casual gear: linen trousers, navy blue yachting shirt, gold chain round the neck nestling in a fuzz of grey hair, gold watch, white shoes. Plant wasn't sure whether it was Gold Coast or Florida style. Not what he'd expected from an emeritus professor. Not the leather-patched and tweed look Dorritt had described. He had a considerable tan, and the jet-black hair usually characteristic of older Japanese businessmen, who dyed it.

'It's a stunning view,' said Plant.

One hundred and eighty degrees of ocean. A panorama of sand and surf and sea.

'Stunning if you fell out, certainly,' said Oates. 'My little eyrie. I'm so glad you like it.'

'I do,' said Plant.

'Not everyone does,' said Oates. 'I had that English writer fellow here once. Sir Malcolm.' He dwelt on the title and chuckled. 'Couldn't get him anywhere near it. Skulked in the back of the room the whole time. Terrified of heights. Most disappointing. A good sort, too. Sound chap, really, except for that. And his books, of course. Never did think that much of them. Told me he always booked ground floor rooms in hotels. Funny sort of a life. For someone who travelled so much. British Council chap with him was the same. Never seen such a couple of weak sisters.'

'I imagine it could be daunting if you didn't like heights,' said Plant.

'Sorts out the men from the boys. I find it stimulating. Up here above the hurly burly. And down there, the world. Not a bad world, either. Great climate. I said to Greene, Antibes, I

said, why on earth would a chap hole up in Antibes? Have you ever tried to swim in Antibes?'

Plant was forced to admit that he hadn't.

'Cold as buggery. Colder. Give me buggery any time. Bracing. I'll grant you that. Bracing for two months of the year and impossible for the rest. It really isn't enough. I can swim all the year round here.'

'And do you?'

'Of course. Don't you?'

'No,' Plant confessed.

'Oh dear. One should pay attention to the body. It's always been a rule of mine. Physical fitness. Do you bushwalk, perhaps?'

'No.'

'Football?'

'No.'

'Pity. I thought you looked like you might have been a footballer. Another passion of mine.'

'Football?' said Plant.

'Footballers,' said Oates. 'Ah, well.'

He gestured round the apartment.

'So, my little den.'

It was all very modern and metallic and state of the art.

'You can be as much in touch here as anywhere if you have to have the right equipment. Satellite news. Email. Internet. And still have the pleasures of the flesh. Such as remain.'

'No books?' said Plant.

'I don't think they'd quite suit the setting, somehow, do you? Bit too olde worlde, we felt. I had an interior decorator in. Exceptional young man. He went to such trouble to create the ambience. Something post-modern, something youthful, I told him. So I keep the books back at university. I still have my room there. I see it as an adjunct of the university library. If I ever need anything, it's not that far to go.'

'And do you?' Plant asked.

'Do I what?'

'Ever need anything.'

Oates looked at him keenly and chuckled.

'Once in a while, perhaps,' he said. 'But really, I have everything I need here. It's all on the web.'

It didn't feel like that to Plant. What pervaded the room was not any sense of total tactility, in touch with it all, but a huge emptiness, a desolate loneliness. And the spider waiting for the world-wide web to vibrate was like a spider in an empty holiday apartment, waiting for the door to open to let in some flies, and the apartment too high above the ground for the flies to bother with.

They walked along the promenade beneath the palms and pandanus. On the beach tourists and residents swam and sunbathed and looked at each other's flesh. With decent intervals between them. None of that European package, the sardine tin experience, basted in oil and packed tight against each other. Which there were some who liked. Plant didn't. He preferred this. He watched a couple of meter maids in Akubra hats and gold bikinis walking ahead of them, swaying their hips, doing whatever meter maids were supposed to do.

'There's everything here, you know. People sneer at the Gold Coast. But that's very silly. Where else could you have all this? The climate. The view. It's not the Mediterranean, but where is? And the Mediterranean is so boringly monocultural. Only Greek food in Greece, Italian in Italy, French in France. Maybe a rare overpriced Vietnamese dive or an Algerian couscous café. But here, here there's everything. I know, the tourists, you will say. But the Mediterranean is overrun with tourists. And the tourists here have made the restaurant trade. And if you don't want to see them, you can always do take-away. We often do that. So really, of all the possible, unsatisfactory worlds,

this is one of the better ones. For when the blood runs thin. Never too cold. The whole human parade on display. Anything money will buy. Couldn't do better in the Philippines. Or Thailand. Let me assure you.'

'I hadn't thought of it like that,' said Plant.

'You will,' said Oates. 'The time will come.'

'Really?'

'The time inevitably comes. Whether you recognise it or not, of course, is another matter.'

'You've spent time in the Philippines and Thailand?'

'Happy days,' said Oates.

He steered them into a Korean barbeque restaurant.

'As good as anything in Seoul.'

'You were in Seoul too?'

'Way back,' said Oates. 'Like all of it, way back.'

'In the war?'

'Not exactly,' said Oates. 'Let me recommend the bib-im-bab in the stoneware pot. With the raw beef. Unless you're vegetarian, which I think I heard you are. In which case don't have the beef.'

Plant declined the raw beef. Oates ordered it. And a couple of Hite beers.

'One of the advantages of age,' said Oates, 'is there's no need to worry about long incubating viruses. Mad cow disease, for instance. Or AIDS. You'll be dead before they catch up with you.'

'So Dorritt told you we'd met?' said Plant.

'Dear Charley,' said Oates.

'You were his supervisor.'

'Ah well. A sad story there. But yes. Yes, indeed.'

'And then you discontinued him?'

'He discontinued himself, to be precise. He was a good researcher but he had no overview. Never had the conceptual

framework. Imaginative, of course. Too imaginative, really. Too emotional. Got things out of perspective. No way his thesis would ever shape up.'

'But you hired him to research after that?'

'Poor fellow was lost. I tried to give him another chance. But he got carried away.'

'This was a secret service project?'

'Whatever gave you that idea?'

'Dorritt did.'

'Yes, well. You know he had a breakdown.'

'Yes.'

'Delusions,' said Oates. 'Terribly sad.'

'So it wasn't?'

'My dear boy, it was all funded through the Australian Research Council. Or whatever its predecessor called itself. Peer assessment. Usual stuff. Major project.'

'And what happened to it?'

'Happened?'

'Did you ever publish it?'

'Oh, I see. No, sad to say. It was quite a serious breakdown. His work was a frightful mess. Nothing publishable.'

'So where did the material go?'

'The dustbin of history,' said Oates.

'Really?'

'You are suspicious. Would I tell you a lie?'

'You still keep in touch with Dorritt?'

'Oh, yes. He was one of my boys. Well, I suppose they're grown men now. But I still think of them as my boys. I am always glad when good things happen for them. I'm delighted for young Dorritt. So pleased he's found some gainful employment.'

'He told you about his column?'

'Actually it was Ghostly told me that.'

'Sperrit? You know him too?

'But of course. One of mine, too. Dear boy. Faithful fellow. Always keeps me informed.'

'Informed?' said Plant.

'Of whatever he thinks would interest me. Whatever might titillate an old man. Though in this case I more or less knew. Seemed the obvious thing for Dorritt to do. The encyclopaedic mind. Once it was back on track. I was pretty sure Huxter would take the hint. Only the slightest suggestion of a twist of the arm.'

'Huxter?'

'Yes.'

'Another of your boys?'

'Yes. Clever chap. Cold fish but a clever chap. But they all were. Let me tell you a secret. Only take on clever chaps. The ones who are bound to succeed. They do it all themselves and you get all the credit. Sir Malcolm put me onto that one.'

'I'm sure you contributed something,' said Plant.

'Nice of you to say so.'

'So Dorritt and Sperrit and Huxter were all students of yours?'

'My boys, yes.'

'And Angela Dark and Rose?'

'They don't sound like boys to me. Not that one can always tell.'

'Didn't you have girls?'

'Have girls?' said Oates. 'I'm sure I supervised one or two. The odd couple.'

'What about Ollie?'

'Ah, No Robbery,' said Oates.

Plant looked blank.

'Our fair exchange student,' said Oates. 'So I called him No Robbery. Yes, he was another of mine.'

'I thought he was a draft resister,' said Plant.

'Whatever gave you that idea?' Oates asked.

'He wasn't?'

'He was a good young boy.'

'What happened to him?'

'He went back to the States and got into banking.'

'Banking?'

'Not bonking but banking, yes. He has been very successful. Helped arrange finance for the building I live in, in fact. Dear Ollie. It's thanks to him we have our splendid view.'

'And these boys…?'

'Yes?'

'They were all clever students?'

'Oh yes.'

'The brightest of the bright?'

'Now you sadden me,' said Oates.

'They weren't?'

'I could never get to keep the brilliant ones. I had to let them go. Cambridge. Yale. Or wherever. Such a pity. Such a loss. Even dear Ollie went back. But there we are. Realpolitik. A small nation needs its big friends. And if they ask for the flower of our youth, who are we to refuse them?'

'Like the Minotaur,' said Plant.

'I would never put it quite like that,' said Oates.

'Wouldn't you?'

'No. No, I wouldn't.'

'Well,' said Plant, 'that's reassuring.'

'I hope so,' said Oates. 'I hope you can see it in a positive way.'

Thirty Eight

When they had eaten Oates led off to an Irish pub. Inside it was as dark as anything Fullalove might have desired. Oates ordered Kilkenny ale. In pints.

'You were in Ireland, too?'

'Been there, done that,' said Oates.

'Done what?'

'Been there, dear boy.'

They sipped their Irish ales and watched the tourists pass.

'You've finished your little job for Huxter, then?' said Oates.

'Seems so,' said Plant.

'Now you can put it all behind you and take a holiday.'

'I suppose so.'

'Well, you're not doing anything else.'

It was a statement, rather than a question.

'Not at the moment.'

'It's a good country to relax in,' said Oates. 'Sometimes I think of poor old Durrell going barmy in Provence. E. Phillips Oppenheim on the Côte d'Azur. Willie Maugham on Cap Ferrat. Nice architecture, I suppose. But all so very old. There's something about a new country. Not those layers of death and decay. There is so much more stimulation in the new. Even its very transitoriness. Give me the Gold Coast any day.'

An amphibious duck like something left over from the war in the Pacific ferried tourists on a joy ride. Young Japanese shuffled by with hennaed hair.

'I notice you've mentioned a number of novelists. Were you ever tempted to become one?' Plant asked.

'Smart chap, aren't you?' said Oates. 'No offence. A compliment. Pity you weren't one of my boys.'

'I'm sure I would have learned a lot.'

'Nice of you to say so. Appreciate that. Yes, I considered the novel. But it's all rather substitute, isn't it? I prefer the real thing. Living characters. Real ones, anyway. Dead or alive. Flesh and blood figures. The chessboard of life. The great game.'

He downed more of the ale.

'Always had a hankering for the literary life, though. Knew many of the chaps. I thought of taking it up when I retired.'

'But you haven't?'

He chuckled, snuffled. It was the laugh Dorritt had acquired.

'Haven't had the time, to be honest. What it comes to is, you never actually get to retire.'

'Is that good or bad?'

'Just the way it is,' said Oates. 'Beyond good or evil.'

'I suppose so.'

'Keeps you young.'

'Right.'

'Take the Cold War.'

Plant would have preferred not to. But he offered a polite acceptance.

'It may seem to be over to some chaps. But the work goes on. The war on terror. All the same thing. Eternal vigilance. Hard to take the arty-farty fictional stuff seriously. Anything but the real thing seems too tame. Gets you hooked. You don't write, do you?'

'Not really,' said Plant.

Oates chuckled again.

'One of those answers, eh? Take my advice, then, and don't. Don't write it. Just do it and mum's the word. Dear old Mum. But I wouldn't put any of it in writing. Not at all wise. That's what I told young Dorritt. And he agreed. He conceded it was best to let sleeping dogs lie. Threw away his scribblings.'

'I can see the point,' said Plant.

'Excellent,' said Oates. 'The dogs of deceit rather than the dogs of war. It makes for a quieter time.'

He drained the last of the glass.

'I wouldn't want anything to jeopardise young Dorritt's career. Not again. He had such a trying time. You understand.'

Plant understood. He went to the bar and bought another round.

'Just tell me one thing,' he asked when he came back with the drinks.

'If I can,' said Oates.

'If you can.'

'And off the record.'

'Off the record.'

'I shall deny everything, of course.'

'Of course.'

'Not that you would ever be so unwise as to repeat it.'

'I shan't be repeating any of it,' Plant assured him.

'Very wise.'

'When it was all happening, everything that is best not written about and shall never be repeated, one of your boys torturing another, why did no one stop it?'

'I'm not sure it was exactly torture.'

'You're not sure,' said Plant.

'I wouldn't want to call it that.'

'Well, whatever.'

'Whatever,' agreed Oates. 'Who would have been able to stop it?'

'Another government man.'

'Another government man.'

'You, for instance,' said Plant.

'Ah me,' said Oates. 'Ah, me.'

'Yes, you.'

'I'm hardly a government man.'

'And this was hardly a secret service operation?'

'Hardly.'

'But say it had been.'

'Why would I say that?'

'For the sake of argument. A hypothesis. For the plot of one of those novels you never wrote.'

'Well, I'm no expert in these things,' said Oates.

'Of course not.'

'They were all my boys,' said Oates. 'How could I favour one before another? It was for them to sort it out between themselves.'

'Survival of the fittest,' said Plant.

'What else is there?'

'So you just let it happen.'

'Boys will be boys,' said Oates.

'But couldn't you have intervened?'

'I was not there. How could I have intervened?'

'But would you have, had you been there?'

'Intervened?'

'Yes.'

'Probably not,' said Oates.

He took a long draught of his Kilkenny ale.

'You know what the British always said about Northern Ireland? Keeping the troops there? It was excellent training. Real-life situations. Much better than having exercises. You actually lost fewer chaps in the field. People are much better when it's a matter of life and death. Less sloppy. Brings out their real qualities.'

'So this was an exercise?'

'No, no. I wouldn't say that. Not for a moment. I would say it was absolutely for real. If it ever happened. But say for the sake of argument that it did happen, then it would have been the real thing.'

'But it was being monitored.'

'Ah well, that's different. Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, they were all being monitored too, of course. But you wouldn't say they were exercises. Not just exercises. They scored some real casualties. That way you see how people stand up under stress. And how the technology works. You never know with weapons, let alone with chemicals, till you try them in the field.'

'So you tried a few chemicals out on Dorritt?'

'Not me, dear boy, I'm no chemist.'

'But somebody did.'

'Just a few wild mushrooms, as I understand.'

'But what you're suggesting is, if certain chaps wanted to find out how Dorritt would bear up under interrogation, see if he was safe to use, how he'd survive, this would have been the perfect testing ground.'

'Well, he didn't do too well, did he?' said Oates. 'Cracked up, poor boy. Spilled the beans.'

'And you let that happen.'

'You do make it sound like one of those novels I never wrote,' said Oates.

'Or was it Huxter who was being tested? Chap with a lot of potential. Great future ahead of him. See if he had the killer instinct.'

'No doubt about the killer instinct.'

'So he was being tested too?'

'It's a possible scenario,' said Oates. 'Hard to simulate these things. Rarely get an opportunity to see the real thing.'

'So Dorritt's research project and Huxter's paper were never serious.'

'Oh, I wouldn't say that.'

'But they weren't the main purpose.'

'Not the only purpose, perhaps.'

'Basically, though, the whole thing was a training exercise.'

'Oh no, it would have been the real thing,' said Oates. 'If it ever happened, of course. Real life. Absolutely. Though some would say real life itself is but a training exercise.'

'I don't know about that,' said Plant.

Oates smiled at him.

'Often, of course,' he said, 'you don't. But that doesn't mean that it hasn't been an exercise and that you haven't been monitored.'

'Is that so?' said Plant.

'I imagine so,' said Oates.

'Did I pass?'

Oates smiled. A seedy, sad smile.

'If you have to ask, dear boy, you must already know the answer.'

'But if I knew the answer, I wouldn't have to ask, would I?'

Oates mused reflectively.

'Different answers, perhaps?' he suggested.

He drained his pint mug and got up from the table.

'Afternoon nap time,' he said. 'Doctor's orders.'

They headed out onto the street.

'You must come and visit some day,' said Oates. 'Come and stay. Give yourself a holiday.'

'That's very kind of you,' said Plant.

'Not at all. Glad of a bit of interesting company. Think about it. You don't have to make up your mind now. Go away and think it over.'

Plant walked back to his car and got into it and went away and thought it over.

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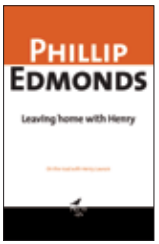
Peter Corris
WISHART'S QUEST
ISBN 978 1 921509 54 4

In a New England country town, academic Tom Wishart is struck by an amateur painting in the local art gallery. *It looks just like him.* Wishart is a foundling who knows nothing about his parents. This uncanny resemblance sets him on a quest to discover his origins.

As the search reaches back in time, the turbulent, shadowy lives of Paul Bushell, son of the squattocracy and disgraced Vietnam deserter, and Diana Saunders, vanished Aboriginal sportswoman, come into view and are played out. Could these be his parents? How and why was he abandoned? The trail leads to Sydney, Vietnam, Manila and Hong Kong, until the answers are found in a isolated place in the Blue Mountains.

Corris's portrayals of Australia stand out uniquely – forceful, hard-driven, compassionate. – James Ellroy

Wishart's Quest is Peter Corris's sixty-second work of fiction. He has written thirty-five books featuring Sydney private detective Cliff Hardy, as well as espionage, comic and historical novels. His non-fiction includes *Lords of the Ring: A History of Prize-fighting in Australia* and the collaborative *Fred Hollows – An Autobiography*. **www.petercorris.net**



Phillip Edmonds
LEAVING HOME WITH HENRY
ISBN 978 1 921509 55 1

Henry Lawson arises from the vaults of the National Library and hitches a ride out of Canberra.

His driver Trevor is in search of the 'real' Australia, and they travel together through western New South Wales, on up into Queensland, retracing the past and the present.

Henry has a romantic moment in Nimbin, makes it to the Gold Coast, and eventually finishes up in his old home town of Sydney.

A contemporary road novel with epic implications, this is a vision of Australia the way we live now, seen from Henry's perspective of how we might have been. Are we an egalitarian people, or only individuals pursuing pleasure?

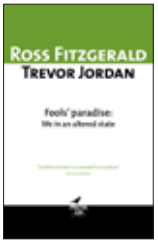
Phillip Edmonds has worked for the National Book Council in Melbourne, taught in Asia and on the Gold Coast, and is currently a lecturer in Creative Writing and Australian Literature at the University of Adelaide. He is managing editor of *Wet Ink* (www.wetink.com.au), the quarterly magazine of new writing, and has written a number of collections of stories, edited *A Sense of Place* and co-edited *Emerge – Australian New Writing*.

Inez Baranay
WITH THE TIGER
ISBN 978 1 921509 57 5

Australian teenager Larry Darrell returns from backpacking in India to refuse the privileges and opportunities of his former life. His travels take him to personal growth workshops, a fashionable ashram, the worlds of art and politics, a Buddhist monastery and an Indian saint. Meanwhile his ex-fiancée Isabel achieves wealth and fame when she marries their old friend Gray, a Queensland property developer. By the end of the 1980s they are bankrupt and disgraced.

Ten years later they meet again in Sydney, along with Isabel's camp, domineering uncle Elliott, their badly behaved, grieving old friend Sophie, and the playwright who narrates this story.

Inez Baranay is the author of *Between Careers, Sheila Power, The Edge of Bali* and *Neem Dreams*. *With The Tiger*, her ninth book, is a contemporary take on W. Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*. www.inezbaranay.com



Ross Fitzgerald and Trevor Jordan
FOOLS' PARADISE:
LIFE IN AN ALTERED STATE
ISBN 978 1 921509 58 2

'Wake up, Australia,' Grafton Everest exhorts viewers every morning on Australia-wide breakfast television. This doesn't please those he attacks like incumbent state premier, Bruce Henderson, former premier wily old Sir Otis Hoogstraden, and Mr David Satoya, Visiting Fellow in Tourist Economics at the University of Mangoland, where Grafton holds down a day job as Professor of LifeSkills and Hospitality. And Lee Horton, head of Australia's newly privatised Secret Service (trading as Spyforce Australia) is worried too. He knows that Grafton has trouble lying. And nothing is more dangerous than a man who habitually tells the truth.

Hoogstraden and Horton are losing ground to the new conservative, media-savvy songstress, Marnie Miller, whose short but feminine auburn hair, discreet earrings, steel-capped cowboy boots and homespun demagoguery have boot-scooted her to political stardom. The School of Humanities and Lifeskills is under threat from the economically and sexually rapacious Vice-Chancellor Deidre Morrow. And Grafton is forced into a deal with the Devil – Sir Otis Hoogstraden – to write Sir Otis's biography.

Grafton Everest is a wonderful creation whom I would place without question in the ranks of Philip Roth's Portnoy and Kingsley Amis's Lucky Jim. – Barry Humphries

Ross Fitzgerald's books include three previous Grafton Everest novels, *Pushed from the Wings: An Entertainment, All About Anthrax,* and *Busy in the Fog: Further Adventures of Grafton Everest.* His non-fiction includes *The Footy Club, The Greatest Game, 'Red Ted': The Life of E.G. Theodore, The Pope's Battalions: Santamaria, Catholicism and the Labor Split,* and *My Name is Ross: An Alcoholic's Journey.* www.rossfitzgerald.com

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Michael Wilding
SUPERFLUOUS MEN
ISBN 978 1 921509 47 6

Henry, Pawley and Dr Dee of *Academia Nuts* have taken early retirement.
But what awaits them? Does anything?
Pawley buys a dacha high in the Valley of the Weed.
Dr Bee cruises the shopping malls.
Henry is lured by the Director of the Writers' Centre to be her Chair.
Vistas of arts bureaucracies lie all before them.

A black comedy for a sunburned country, *Superfluous Men* treats early retirement and the literary bureaucracy with the same sparkling wit, incisive analysis, and inside information that characterised Michael Wilding's portrayal of the university in his best-selling *Academia Nuts*.

Wilding is a wicked observer of human foibles and bureaucracy; and he has an evilly good ear for the dopey chit-chat that so often passes for high flown discourse and earnest-speak. It's very funny. – Diana Simmonds, *SAM*

Why should the reader be interested in Michael's protagonists, these 'drunken old men of a certain age, forgotten by the world and reciprocating its disregard'? Mostly it's because they are extremely funny, their verbal witticisms serving to starkly and sometimes surprisingly emphasize their point. Wilding's satirical edge evokes in the reader not only sly smiles of recognition but outright guffaws of full-blown belly laughter. – Irina Dunn, *Quadrant*

Blackly funny … Wilding's satire is merciless. – Kerryn Goldsworthy, *Sydney Morning Herald*

A brave new world of political correctness gone mad. – Ross Fitzgerald, *Weekend Australian*

www.michael-wilding.com

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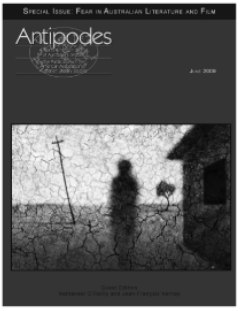

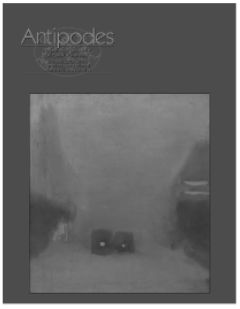

Since 1987, *Antipodes* has dedicated its pages to the practice and study of Australian literature and is now enjoyed by leading academics and enthusiasts around the world.

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Each issue of *Antipodes* also includes an extensive book review section, keeping readers up-to-date with the latest creative and scholarly work in the field of Australian literary studies.

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